

HEALTH

COMMUNITY

New ownership, same mission for dementia care center

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The name's the same at Dementia Day Center, as are the faces inside the building. But changes have been made behind the scenes to secure the future of the facility for adults with dementia and their caregivers. And that was on purpose.

The nonprofit CarePartners took over operation of the center, located at 3838 Aberdeen Way near Bellaire, at the beginning of the year.

Making the switch in ownership as seamless as possible for patients was paramount. With dementia, disruptive changes can worsen an individual's condition.

CarePartners worked for months with former owners BakerRipley, a United Way Agency, to sustain the standard of care for clients and their families.

All employees were able to retain their roles, and the program continues to operate in the same way as in years past.

Established in 1987 as Sheltering Arms, it was the first dementia-specific adult day care center in Texas — and remains the only one in Houston to serve adults with moderate-to-late-stage dementia. The space offers care for 150 clients and 350 family caregivers each year.

"The purpose of the Dementia Day Center was to be there for families that often felt they didn't have options," said CarePartners president Katie Scott. And she would know. Before assuming her current post, she served as the center's director for a decade.

"I loved the fact that I could be there for both the person with the disease, as well as the caregiver," she said.

CarePartners formed in 1986, originally focusing on the population with HIV and AIDS, who did not have access to care or the proper support. In the 1990s, as more treatment options became available for HIV patients, CarePartners shifted its mission to serving those with dementia and their families, who often became caregivers.

Scott explained that families caring for a loved one with dementia can become isolated and lose their support networks.

CarePartners responded by developing educational programs, workshops and conferences, as well as building support groups. A homebound program called "Second Family" trained volunteers to visit clients at their homes to offer help at no cost.

"It's about meeting people where they are — in their homes," Scott said.

The "Gathering Place" is another popular CarePartners program. Different congregations around Houston host a half day of activities for individuals with dementia.

"These gatherings are like mini day care centers," Scott said.

Currently, Scott said there are about 50 Gathering Places offered at congregations on different days of the week.

Expanding to a centrally located, full-day option seemed like a logical next step.

"Adding the Dementia Day Center to our services just made sense," Scott said.

Dementia is one of the most prevalent chronic conditions in the world, and the only one that is neither preventable nor curable. In addition, Alzheimer's is the sixth leading cause of death in the U.S.

Scott said that in the Houston region, about 62,000 individuals are living with Alzheimer's and other types of dementia. That number will only increase as the city's population ages, she added.

In the meantime, care continues to become more elusive and expensive, Scott said.

She explained that Alzheimer's



Photos by Mark Mulligan / Staff photographer

Dementia Day Center director Andrea Williams, center, talks with a member as they participate in a drum circle.

er's disease and related dementia account for 48 percent of the caregivers needed — and 30 to 40 percent of family caregivers suffer from depression and anxiety.

"Caregivers are stressed out already," Scott said. "We can be there for them when they are on this journey. We want to partner with families. We want to get them the right resources at the right time."

At the Dementia Day Center, clients, referred to as "members," have a place to go, where they receive nursing care, personal hygiene assistance and lunch.

Director Andrea Williams added that the calendar is full of activities, including dance, cooking classes, music, drama, chair yoga, Zumba, tai chi and meditation.

"There is no typical day," she said. "Each day is new and different."

There's a patio for when the weather is nice, a listening room with a record collection, a piano for musicians, an art area, garden for members with green thumbs and a spa-like room for resting and even hand massages.

Williams said the environment was built with members in mind.

"You just wish you could have places like this all over," she said. "People don't know about us the way they should. I don't want to be the best-kept secret in Houston. I want people to know we are here."

BakerRipley had announced plans to close the Dementia Day Center by October 2021, following a two-year assessment regarding sustainability of programs and stewardships of resources.

"As we assessed our strengths and the needs of our community, we determined a clearer and more focused strategy related to socioeconomic mobility will allow us to integrate and leverage our resources towards a greater impact for the neighbors we



CarePartners president Katie Scott, center, says the organization was able to retain both clients and staff after taking over the Dementia Day Center from BakerRipley.

serve," BakerRipley announced in a statement at the time.

From Scott's time at the day center's helm, she was well aware of what it took to operate the facility. CarePartners began planning and reaching out for feedback from stakeholders, including board members, volunteers, industry experts and those who used the service.

"We had already been talking about how we could do more to show up for the Houston community," Scott said.

But there was a catch: Taking on the center would require doubling operations as well as budget. "If we could get funding for this, we knew we could take it on," Scott said.

The board unanimously voted to proceed, launching a fundraising campaign with a goal of \$1.2 million in three years, \$1.1 million of which has been raised to date.

CarePartners worked with the Harris County Agency on Aging and Veterans Affairs to ensure financial underpinning and with the state to obtain needed licensing.

The existing relationship between CarePartners and Dementia Day Center helped facilitate the change in ownership. For instance, Scott said,

there was a lot of volunteer crossover.

"That was common," she said. "The connection was there. It was a great symbiotic relationship."

Now, several months after the transition, and CarePartners, continues to push ahead. "This is just one piece of what we can do," Scott said.

Already, CarePartners added a caregiver consultant, a social worker who works one on one with families. The organization is also in the midst of a strategic planning process.

"The amount of support Houston provided during this transition showed us we need to be here," Scott said. "We want to determine how to be an even bigger resource for the city. Our board and staff are hard at work figuring that out."

Williams explained that extra measures are taken to ensure caregivers feel comfortable leaving their loved ones at the center for the day.

"People often forget about the caregivers," she said. "And it takes a village to care for someone with dementia. We're proud to be a part of the village."

Caregivers can reserve a half or full day at the center. "Then they have the oppor-

tunity to take a break, go to the doctor, go to work, whatever you need," she said.

Williams explained that many people with dementia cannot be left home alone safely — and time at the center alleviates that danger.

"We know dementia," she said. "We also know that beautiful things can happen in the right environment. And that's what we are, a place where people can flourish."

Williams worked as assistant director at BakerRipley for four years, before becoming director in May 2021.

"One of the things I am most happy about is that the day center was able to remain open," she said. "Wonderful things are happening everyday for our members."

Scott added that adult day care is about \$40,000 less per year than long-term care options, which are often not covered by insurance. She said that 88 percent of nursing home care expenses are paid by the family.

Sara Rozin has regularly brought her husband, Haim, to the center since 2019. Signs of dementia onset began in 2010 but began rapidly progressing in 2017.

"I was completely caught by surprise," she said.

And it was making home life challenging.

"He couldn't express his feelings," Rozin said. "It created unnecessary tension that could have been avoided."

A social worker told her about the Dementia Day Center. Rozin dialed their number, and before long, her husband was attending three days a week.

At first, Rozin said it was difficult to get him to accept that he needed to go to the center, but he ended up enjoying the activities.

"Slowly, we got into a routine," she said. "I am blessed we found this center for him. The center does a wonderful job."

Rozin is passionate about supporting caregivers — and wishes she had access to education from the get-go.

"We need to draw up a plan," she said. "The sick person suffers, no question. We as caregivers do not suffer the way they do, but we cry more. We don't know where to turn or what to do."

Rozin suggests that other caregivers be proactive and identify resources to support their difficult job, which often comes with no training and requires 24-hour dedication.

"Don't wait," she said.



Scott says she wants to make sure caregivers get help, too.



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Lindsay Peyton is a Houston-based freelance writer.