How Watermark, Priority, Insight Use Data to Improve Senior Living Operations

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Data usage is changing the way the senior housing industry is tackling operations, with new applications in just about every department of a company.

Brian Zybart, principal of Insight Living, said during a recent Senior Housing News webinar the company is using data to support the company's ongoing growth and evolution efforts. According to Zybart, the barriers to entry of using new technology are only getting lower and new options are continually improving.

By utilizing data,senior living operators can improve staffing and better differentiate themselves among people living at home. It also helps operators fine-tune operations to hit a middle-market price point for resident rates.

"That data is really allowing us to staff and identify trends and patterns more efficiently so that we can ensure that our residents are receiving the care," Sevy Petras, CEO of Priority Life Care, said during the SHN webinar. "We have to be a lot more intentional with where the allocation of resources is going."

Watermark Communities has been utilizing an internal program called Watermark Connect that is used for both residents and associates to reduce overall turnover, according to President and CEO David Barnes.

"We spend so much time as an industry looking at our sales processes, from doing home visits to speed to lead and all that," Barnes said. "The biggest thing that kind of keeps me up at night is labor and labor markets that we're dealing with."

Data for staffing

Watermark's Connect program can be used to track key performance indicators to get a better understanding of new and existing staff members, such as average job applicant response time and survey data.

"We've seen by doing this and focusing on it, we've seen our associate turnover lowered," Barnes said. "We're constantly working with teams and sharing those best practices and helping them implement it."

Watermark Connect has also been utilized to track instances of culture in communities, which Barnes said was highlighted drastically because of the pandemic, through a series of monthly pulse surveys within the first 30, 60 and 90 days to reduce resident turnover and improve length of stay. Without touching on cultural points, it's entirely possible for communities to fail, leaving companies to scramble with resources to address the issues, he said.

Petras added that having more data about operations enables leaders to hold teams accountable, particularly in sales and marketing, and when tracking open positions and hiring new employees.

"You know a good culture and a building when you walk into one, but it is a science and not an art as to how you're going to apply it," Petras said.

Priority Life Care has used data to track agency usage and overtime. While agency usage has seen a near constant decrease in recent months, Petras noted there is still a time and place for its usage, such as giving staff members a break when something like the flu or during Covid outbreaks. However, Priority Life Care's usage is currently down to 0.2% of total staffing.

Priority Life Care has struggled with overtime, as have other operators. But Petras noted it is becoming a downward trend. Higher amounts of overtime can also show that team members want to be there – a good sign at the end of the day.

"If you look historically at any industry, when the labor costs and challenges become too difficult, technology finds a way to fill in those voids to help normalize out your margins and solve for some of those things," Petras said.

Petras noted that the industry "would be remiss" to not utilize AI to aid with staffing challenges and decisions. She also noted she does not foresee staff being entirely replaced by AI and robots due to the focus on personal experiences within the industry.

In order to emphasize operations, Zybart noted Insight uses a "low tech" approach to organization design, but when technology is trialed it's done in a "low ego" way, where teams are ready and willing to pivot as needed. Some of these uses have led to the hiring of two positions who are "willing to embrace" the trial and error of trying new technologies and push the envelope for a work structure.

Operational priorities with technology

With the amount of data available to operators, operational priorities for using vary.

Driving occupancy to new buildings at Insight Living is the top priority, and the company tracks "early in the funnel" metrics such as speed-to-lead and ratios across the pipeline funding the operational processes of the company.

Additionally, data is used to provide accurate and timely financial closing for Insight's partners, which leads to healthier financial partnerships, Zybart said.

Barnes noted Watermark takes a "balanced scorecard approach" with its metrics, and is focusing on five key areas, including occupancy, associate satisfaction, resident satisfaction, financial KPIs and programming. With these focuses in place, Barnes noted they all feed into each other, resulting in overall stronger performance.

Petras said while Priority Life Care's focuses are similar to Insight, the company is also compiling data on the impact and response times of falls, particularly within memory care, noting the average response time is between two and three minutes.

Petras added seeing hard data has been translatable and scalable for Priority Life Care, and as such they are able to do more as it enters new communities and new markets.

"We can evaluate things in real time," she said. "We have had a 40% decrease in incidents, specifically in falls. And as a result of those decreases, we've also been able to decrease our ER visits by almost 80%."