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AVOW'S GEORGESON HOSPICE HOUSE RENOVATIONS MAKE IT EASIER FOR FAMILIES TO FEEL AT EASE AND SPEND QUALITY TIME WITH THEIR LOVED ONES.

BY TESS RAINES

It's not customary to equate the service of a hospice with that of a five-star resort. Unless you consider Avow.

In fact, a five-star resort experience is exactly what Jaysen Roa, Avow's president and CEO, and staff had in mind for this year's Frances Georgeson Hospice House renovation. "We always knew that we provided exceptional care, but we had to bump that up a little bit," says Dawn Kolderman, Avow's director of inpatient services. "When all is said and done, (the families) are the ones who are there. So how do we make this the best situation we can for them?"

Kolderman's question prompted a meeting among her, Roa and Brad Gatian, the director of facilities, to discuss what they would expect from a five-star establishment. Simple comforts were agreed upon—things like fresh, cold water; coffee and tea; a front desk that is occupied more than 12 hours a day to greet and direct visitors from morning to evening. They also determined that a hospice house designed to feel warm and inviting to visiting families would have soft music playing overhead and walls that weren't painted a shocking hospital white.

Almost immediately, the hospice house was granted a coffee bar complete with latte and espresso machines, with ground coffee brought in from Tampa's own Joffrey's company. Fresh-baked muffins are laid out in the mornings, only



Above and right: Designer renderings of the new family café/eating area coming to Frances Georgeson Hospice House.

to be replaced with warm cookies at 3 p.m. on the dot every afternoon.

The building's walls received a light blue and beige wash, while the staff uniforms underwent a similar shift to a bright, crisp sky blue.

The changes brought in waves of glowing reviews, though Kolderman noticed that a handful of guests left suggestions for other small comforts that they wished they had during their visit. The staff assembled gift bags with items most people forget to bring: reusable water bottles, a toothbrush and toothpaste, a notebook with a pen, potato chips, mints and socks.

Amid all these changes, two suggestions consistently showed up on the surveys, leaving Kolderman stumped. Visitors noted that they needed space outside the hospice rooms to relax without leaving the wing altogether; and they desired a place to sit down and enjoy a meal with their loved one instead of crowding over takeout in the patient's room. Neither of these changes were as simple as putting together a gift bag. But Kolderman's commitment to a dignified experience sparked major change.

To create a space for visitors to take a break from the hospice room, Kolderman had the large cement pads outside of each wing converted into lanais. Outdoor furniture and a ceiling fan keep the area cool and comfortable for family members to retreat when they need to finish work, make a phone call or just unwind. She noticed that small sitting areas with adjacent lanais in each wing had gone mostly unused for years, so each area and its lanai were joined and enclosed to become interior space, complete with couches, tables and chairs. "Those are challenges, but we have been looking to see how we can renovate what we currently have," she says.

The hospice house has family rooms with floor-to-ceiling windows that look out over Lake Glenna, in the center of the campus. Kolderman notes that even during a rainstorm, patients and families can find it calming to settle onto the couch together to watch the storm. Or, if they'd like more socializing, a large round table can accommodate a family meal or a competitive card game. A children's play room in the corner makes for a homelike setting.

Prior to the renovations, Kolderman notes that families staying at the hospice house never wanted to leave their loved one's wing to eat, and opted for

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takeout to share in the rooms, balancing containers on their laps and sometimes sitting on the floor. There was only a standard commercial kitchen and limited seating. “We can do better than that,” Kolderman says.

Sourcing inspiration from other hospices with open kitchens, Avow worked with a designer who laid out a rendering for an open-air bistro-style kitchen. “(Visitors) can sit as a family, and we will provide comfort meals,” she says. “That was one of the biggest takeaways—they just want to have that meal together.”

Over the next year, Avow expects to see the area converted into a cafe-style setting, with a bar-length counter and individual family tables. A revamped menu lets patients and their families choose from a variety of options, such as pancakes and omelets for breakfast, or pasta for dinner—a wholesome upgrade from the standard takeout.

And if the families still desire a private meal, renovations to the 16 hospice rooms will make that possible. Kolderman is anticipating new tile flooring in the bathrooms, safer and comfier flooring in the bedrooms, wainscoting and a new splash of color on the walls. Additional seating and love seats that convert to beds can be readily available for extra family members or friends. And, she adds, all medical-related items will be out of sight.

“It can be a challenge to incorporate a homelike environment,” she says. Many of the subtle—but important—changes were a result of Roa’s conversations with staff and families, to get a feel for what’s needed, even as those needs are constantly evolving.

“Everyone’s journey is different,” Kolderman says. “We can always ensure exceptional care, dignified care. We need to do that for families as well.”



Designer’s rendering of a refreshed patient room in
Frances Georgeson Hospice House.