



# Clear Eyes, Full Attendance Sheets, Can't Lose

A Life Enrichment Playbook from Icon

# Life enrichment programs are vitally important for senior living communities. Why?



Put simply, they make your residents healthier. Numerous studies show that social engagement improves physical health. It also boosts brain function, literally changing the makeup of people's gray matter. But this isn't necessarily news. Most senior living leaders have long recognized the importance of life enrichment programs. So why are they a greater priority today? What's changed?

1. An uptick in social isolation. Loneliness and social isolation aren't just emotions. They're health risks that increase the risk of dementia by 50 percent, heart disease by 29 percent, and strokes by 32 percent. And thanks to early-pandemic policies, many seniors are feeling the effects.
2. More chronic conditions. Today, 92 percent of older adults have at least one chronic condition. But we're seeing chronic conditions develop at breakneck paces, and it could lead to generations of older adults that need more support.
3. The incoming "silver tsunami". By 2040, one in five Americans (81 million people) will be over the age of 65. In 2019, that number was just 54 million.

Today, senior living communities need to prepare for a larger population of older adults (with more chronic conditions) and also prioritize social engagement for current residents who experienced isolation.

Read on for six strategies that you can use to make sure your life enrichment program meets residents' current and future needs.

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# 1 Appeal to Every Dimension of Wellness

Older adults are gravitating more toward wellness-centered living. In response, operators are developing more communities that follow this model. But you don't need to build a community from the ground up or change your model to offer residents the wellness they seek.

This work can start by using the dimensions of wellness to guide your life enrichment program. A bonus: this framework helps keep your life enrichment program varied and engaging.

To that end, we've highlighted some activity examples for each dimension of wellness below:

Wellness Dimension	This Dimension is All About...	Relevant Activity Ides
 <b>Emotional</b>	Fostering an awareness of the world and people's responses to it.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gratitude workshops</li> <li>• Letter writing campaigns</li> </ul>
 <b>Environmental</b>	Valuing the relationships between humans and the planet.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community clean-up days</li> <li>• Vegetable gardening</li> <li>• Flower-planting projects</li> </ul>
 <b>Financial</b>	Managing expenses and improving the relationships people have with money.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extreme couponing competitions</li> <li>• Resident-led events that include budget management tasks</li> </ul>
 <b>Intellectual</b>	Appealing to curiosity and cultivating a "life-long learner" mentality.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Language classes</li> <li>• Museum trips</li> <li>• Book clubs</li> </ul>
 <b>Physical</b>	Maintaining a quality of life that lets people complete daily activities and find joy in movement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chair aerobics</li> <li>• Tai chi</li> <li>• Pickleball</li> </ul>
 <b>Social</b>	Nurturing positive interpersonal relationships by encouraging conversation and trust.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Movie matinees</li> <li>• Golf trips</li> <li>• Theater outings</li> </ul>
 <b>Spiritual</b>	Encouraging people to find and connect with their innermost selves.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meditation or yoga practice</li> <li>• Faith-based worship</li> <li>• Cultural programming</li> </ul>
 <b>Vocational</b>	Exploring different career paths and developing new skills.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continuing education courses</li> <li>• Resident-led workshops or lectures (when residents have expertise in given fields)</li> </ul>



In many cases, it's easy to find the social or physical wellness tie-ins for your existing life enrichment activities. Challenge yourself to schedule events that hit on the "lesser-known" dimensions (vocational, environmental, financial). That's where your commitment to wellness shines through.

## 2 Prioritize Accessibility and Safety

Community-wide quarantines, though necessary, left an indelible mark on older adults. Even in the best of situations, there was still a transition period where staff had to retrofit their activities to a digital landscape. And that period left many older adults isolated from their loved ones and friends.

So where do you go from here? Short answer: commit to accessibility and safety. Longer answer? Try these four practices:

1. **Evaluate residents' abilities and preferences.** Consider adding a resident activity assessment to new resident orientations. Then use those insights to design a life enrichment program that includes every resident.
2. **Commit to virtual and hybrid events.** Offering virtual alternatives helps ensure each resident in your community can participate in activities. Remote and hybrid programming has the added benefit of helping families interact with their loved ones' activities – from live-streaming choir concerts to watching recorded improv performances.
3. **Improve your indoor air quality.** Air filtration systems have become a popular investment for senior living communities. Besides helping limit the transmission of viruses, these systems also tick an important box for prospective community members. Sixty-two percent of older adults and their children said they would likely choose one community over another if it prioritizes indoor air purification.

Supply emergency kits with hand sanitizer, masks, and tissues to residents and staff. This may seem like a small measure, but it communicates that you value the efforts residents take to stay healthy. You can take this a step further and display messages throughout your community encouraging folks to mask up and regularly wash their hands if they're feeling unwell or when seasonal bugs roll around.

**A necessary question to ask when it comes to offering accessible, safe events is: can every resident attend this event and feel comfortable?**

If so, congratulations, you've fostered a thoroughly engaging, safe, and inclusive environment!

If not, consider which barriers stand in your way. Do you have a way to easily track and update activities assessments? Can you share live streams of onsite activities with your broader community? Can you program virtual events?

There's a good chance that, whatever next steps you take, senior living technology can help. Whether it's community engagement platforms that give residents access to your events or digital calendar platforms that help staff monitor attendance and build virtual activities, **the right technology can greatly improve the accessibility and safety of your life enrichment program.**

## 3 Lean on Your Staff's Creativity and Knowledge

Onsite staff members know how their community operates. They know which spaces best fit which activity. They know what initiatives have been tried in the past. And perhaps most importantly, they know what residents think of the life enrichment programming. So how do you tap into your staff's knowledge? Try these strategies.



Onsite Community Leaders	Operators and Enterprise Teams
<p><b>Ask staff what they're hearing from residents.</b></p> <p>Host all-hands calls to discuss your current life enrichment program. What are residents saying? What aren't they saying? If staff members want more privacy, carve out time in one-on-one meetings to discuss certain activities or strategies.</p>	<p><b>Find data supporting anecdotal evidence.</b></p> <p>Let's say a life enrichment director mentions seeing low turnout for outdoor activities in their community. With multi-site <a href="#">enterprise reporting features</a>, executive teams can determine whether this is a pattern and whether it's happening in other communities.</p>
<p><b>Encourage staff to share their own activity ideas.</b></p> <p>Maybe you host team-wide brainstorming sessions every quarter. Maybe teams share ideas over time and track them in a shared document. Maybe you do some combination. Just make sure to file the ideas in a place you can always refer back to.</p>	<p><b>Reward staff for participating in life enrichment planning.</b></p> <p>A 2019 report found that <a href="#">94 percent of employees</a> would stay longer with a company that invested in their professional development. One great way to do that: create clear promotional opportunities when staff goes above and beyond.</p>
<p><b>Vote on the ideas your staff brings to the table.</b></p> <p>Depending on the culture of your team, you may vote in person or over an anonymous survey. Want to incentivize staff participation? Consider offering a prize for the winning idea(s).</p>	<p><b>Seek out feedback from staff.</b></p> <p>The questions you ask will determine how valuable staff feedback is. Feel empowered to ask tougher questions. Do you feel supported in your job? Are executive initiatives making it easier to plan the life enrichment calendar? Harder? What do you need? What do your residents need?</p>

**A general rule of thumb: the happier the staff, the happier the residents.** Senior living staff members choose this career because it gives them the opportunity to meaningfully improve older adults' lives every day. Still, caregiving is exhausting. It's physically and emotionally demanding.

When your staff knows leadership sees them as partners and wants to hear their ideas, that gives them a reason to stick around. That's key for maintaining the consistency of your life enrichment program and for keeping communities fully staffed.



## 4 Give Your Residents a Say in Programming

Staff members know your residents pretty well. But nobody knows your residents quite like your residents. They're the ones showing up – or not showing up – to the activities you promote. They know what they like. Use that to your advantage.

One [strategy used by the most innovative companies](#) is to get end users involved. In other words, if you want to build a calendar residents are excited about, ask them what they want!

If you deal with low event attendance, that might mean you need to...

- Ask residents what they want.
- Test different activity ideas.
- Collect feedback regularly.
- Make changes based on that feedback.

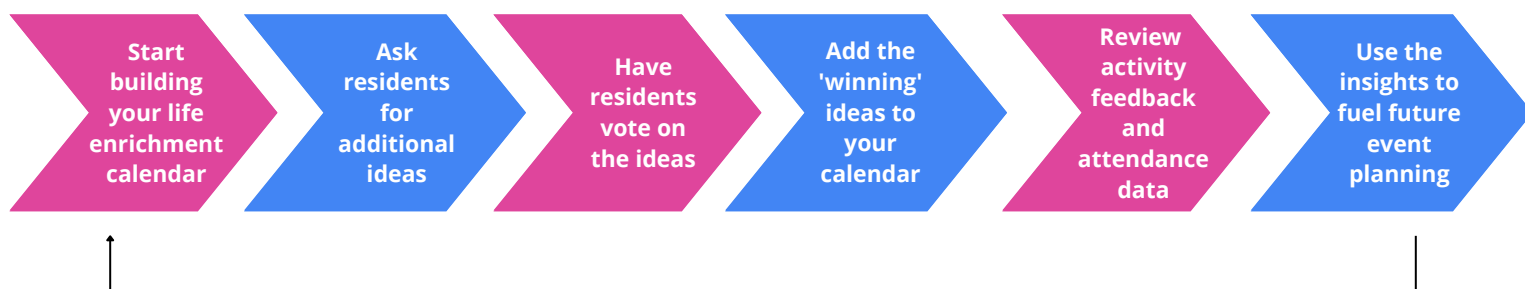
Here's how this process might work in practice. Let's say you lead a life enrichment program. As you build your activities calendar, you ask residents which events they enjoy, maybe in an online poll. (With the [right technology](#), that poll could be a simple prompt asking them to give events a  or  from your chosen engagement portal.) Once voting has ended, you add the three most popular activities to your calendar.

You then ask if any residents want to help plan certain events (here's a financial wellness opportunity!). You run the event. You [send out feedback forms](#) and check attendance numbers. You use that information to plan the next month's or quarter's worth of activities. And you repeat the process.

Still looking for more? Here are some specific ways you can promote resident participation:

- **Encourage the formation of a resident activities committee.** Though created for a slightly different reason, the resident tech committee at Ohio Living Westminster-Thurber helped improve life at Ohio Living by spearheading technology training.
- **Work with the committee to organize events.** This might mean meeting once a month or creating a group in your community engagement portal that's dedicated to sharing activity ideas.
- **Host open forums with community members.** These forums are great opportunities to hear more about what residents want from your life enrichment program. Plus, if you're not getting many survey responses, this is a useful way to collect resident feedback.

### Your Life Enrichment Program Flowchart



Your residents want an iconic aging experience. You want to provide them with one. There's a shared goal here. Look for solutions that can help you achieve it. Residents will readily help you help them – you just need to make that easy to do.



## 5 Make it Easy for Residents to Build Relationships

Older adults are more willing to participate in events if they feel like a part of the community that's programming it. Put differently, **you can boost resident engagement by making residents feel like they belong.**

Staff members do this to some extent, whether by remembering favorite ice cream flavors or forming inside jokes with the residents they see. But the bonds that residents often seek – and need – are with each other. And there are plenty of ways for life enrichment staff to encourage the building of those interpersonal bridges:

- **Keep your activities calendar full.** Don't give folks an excuse to stay in their rooms. If you need help injecting some energy into your life enrichment calendar, check out the dimension of wellness ideas above (or view [this blog](#), [this blog](#), or [this blog](#)).
- **Welcome new members to the community.** Icebreaker games may feel awkward in the moment, but there's a reason they've hung around. If larger games are overwhelming, you can also invite ambassadors from your community to meet new residents in a more manageable setting.
- **Give residents the tools to independently form connections.** The past few years have highlighted the importance of digital connections. Community engagement platforms act as the social hubs for your community. They're where residents can check upcoming activities and even organize their own.



Though social isolation isn't as much of an emergency now that communities have opened up, it's important to [remember its adverse effects](#) on older adults. March 2020 caught many senior living communities by surprise. It forced them to rapidly restructure operations, rethink engagement opportunities, and rely on technology in new ways. Moving forward, the best life enrichment programs will use senior living technology to help residents foster connections with each other. Bonding with like-minded individuals is a huge draw for those who choose to live in a community, after all.

A [2022 report from the American Seniors Housing Association](#) underscores this reality. It found that **senior living communities enhance residents' quality of life** by promoting cohesive social environments and motivating residents to engage in social activities. Residents in the surveyed communities also demonstrated better social, physical, and intellectual wellbeing compared to those who lived outside of a senior living community.



# 6 Keep Loved Ones in the Loop - and Invite Them to Life Enrichment Activities

[Intergenerational relationships are a key driver](#) of positive resident health outcomes. And in many cases, these relationships come from a resident's family, whether with children, grandchildren, or extended relatives.

Keeping residents connected with their loved ones relieves a common concern from families: that they'll lose the connection with their loved ones after they move. This is especially relevant if an aging family member has been living with (or near) their children and grandchildren.

Fortunately, there are lots of ways to support – and even strengthen – a family connection (we'll spell some out below). But the overarching philosophy here is simple. Make families *feel* like a part of your community.

To do this, you might try using our three S's...

- S** **chedule events with families in mind**  
Have an upcoming chapel service for the holidays? Invite family. Want to celebrate residents' wedding anniversaries? Invite family. Looking to recognize the moms and dads in your community on Mother's Day and Father's Day? Invite (you guessed it) family.
- S** **et up hybrid and virtual events on a permanent basis**  
Maybe it's monthly movie nights streamed from a platform like [Teleparty](#). Maybe it's a virtual poker tournament. Whatever the event, making it accessible for every resident and loved one helps ensure the members of your community feel prioritized and valued.
- S** **hare messages and media with residents' loved ones**  
Was your Halloween costume competition a smashing success? Upload group snapshots to your [family engagement homepage](#) and send individual photos to family members through the private messaging tab.

Every resident and family member is different. Some want weekly updates. Others are content with the occasional phone call. This is why offering onsite *and* digital access to loved ones is so valuable. It satisfies both crowds. After all, the best life enrichment programs engage residents *and* their families.

## To Create an Engaging Life Enrichment Program, Think About the Full Resident Experience

It bears repeating: **when you invest in your life enrichment program, you're investing in the health of your residents.**

Your activities don't have to heavily feature physical or mental fitness, either. What you want to do is give residents the chance to participate in the activities that bring them joy. When your residents are happy and healthy, life improves for everyone in your community.

The goal here is to take all you know (from residents, family, staff members, and data) and mold it into a life enrichment program that's tailored to your community. It's not easy, partly because it's an ongoing process. But, done well, it can transform your senior living community into the [go-to spot for older adults in your area](#).

