Food Services Students Exploring Career Paths in LTC

Written by Kristian Partington

Over the next decade, an additional 30,000 Ontarians will make their home in long-term care (LTC), representing a significant increase in necessary care and support for this aging population. LTC providers must now figure out how to meet the growing demand for skilled team members in a sector already spread thin.

Nurses and personal support workers tend to be front of mind in the quest to attract and retain quality team members, but a recent education day hosted by the Ontario Centres for Learning, Research and Innovation in Long-Term Care (Ontario CLRI) at the RIA focused on the importance of nutrition and mealtime experience in the life quality of LTC residents.

Food Service Worker Day brought 15 students from Conestoga College’s Food Service Worker Program to the RIA on Oct. 4, 2018 to hear from registered dietitians, leading researchers in nutrition and aging, food suppliers and LTC residents. Not only did they hear about the important role food services team members play in the lives of residents, they also toured the kitchen and serveries in the neighbouring Village at University Gates to see first-hand what the job is really like.

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Enhancing Life

The Schlegel-UW Research Institute for Aging aims to enhance the quality of life and care of older adults through partnerships in research, education and practice. Innovations are developed and tested in the Schlegel Villages, and then shared to benefit older adults everywhere.
“It’s well known that the LTC sector is in need of employees at all levels,” says RIA project coordinator Holly Hebner, who helped organize the event after Conestoga College instructor Anne Avery contacted the RIA. Anne shared with Holly that she commonly fields calls from LTC providers seeking graduates to hire, but few students understand the opportunities that exist in this sector.

“She was looking for a way we could immerse her class in a day to show them what it’s really like working in LTC,” Holly says. “It’s different having your teacher tell you what it’s like versus actually getting to see it and experience it.”

Unfortunately, a stereotypical view permeates the minds of many students, Holly says, “and there is definitely a stigma around working in LTC. It’s so great to have an opportunity like this so we can challenge that stigma and change some perspectives, which I definitely think we achieved.”

The students first heard from Dr. Heather Keller, Schlegel Research Chair in Nutrition and Aging, who discussed the connection between a positive mealtime experience and optimal nutritional health among LTC residents. The students also heard directly from team members at University Gates who shared what they love most about working in the Village – the relationships they build with residents and the opportunity to explore their creativity during special events.

“As a food service worker, they have a voice in how things run in the kitchen,” Holly says. “They are the ones responsible for making sure residents are receiving the nutrition they need and they are also the people who are able to say ‘you know, let’s make some changes so our residents can have that positive mealtime experience and create that sense of home.’ ”

The Ontario CLRI at the RIA was happy to offer students a glimpse of potential careers in a field hungry for new recruits, and Holly says she’s hopeful students of food services programs at other post-secondary institutions can find the same opportunities. Ideally, students across the province and country will soon realize that LTC is a truly rewarding sector to be a part of.