



High-touch, flexible care

The Optum ‘secret sauce’ for helping residents age in place



After Ronalee “Ronnie” Zeise’s husband passed away in 2022, it was unclear whether she’d be able to stay in the Denver-area senior community where the couple had lived for nearly a decade.

Having lost most of the use of her arms in a car accident years earlier, her husband had been her main caregiver.

To try and keep Zeise in independent living, Eaton Senior Communities helped her enroll in the Optum care model and UnitedHealthcare® Assisted Living Plan, which offered more assistance than she was receiving under her late husband’s retirement benefits.

Today, Zeise says her health has greatly improved. She attributes that in large part to the reduced stress that comes with regular visits from a team dedicated to ensuring she is getting all the care she needs.

Before, Zeise said, she had a hard time just getting to doctor appointments because she can’t drive. And even when she made it to all her appointments, she struggled to get the information she needed to make sense of it all.



“My outlook has improved considerably,” Zeise said. “Because they answer phone calls. They come when they say they are going to come. I don’t have to worry about getting answers for things.”

The secret sauce: High-touch, personalized, whole-patient care

Keeping residents in their communities is at the core of the Optum care model.

“It’s a high-touch model that’s focused on the patient and the patient’s goal of care,” said Stephanie Mello, a regional president for senior community care for Optum in Rhode Island. “That’s really what I would consider the secret sauce.”

“A lot of people say that they have a patient-centric model. But one of the things that you will find from our model is that it truly engages not only the patient, it engages the family, it engages the other care providers in the building to come together and create a whole wrapper around things. It’s about how we connect with that resident every single day.”

Beneath that wrapper is a focus on prevention, care management and mitigating decline.



Preventing decline

“A top priority of the care teams is helping members maintain activities of daily living, or ADL,” said Jamie Babcock, vice president of clinical operations for senior community care at Optum. Because ADL decline is one of the main drivers for moving people out of their homes and into the next level of care.

“We look closely at how we can maintain their independence of those activities of daily living” Babcock said. “Falls prevention and social determinants of health (SDOH) are key parts of that effort. Hip fractures for example, can often lead to a skilled nursing stay, and research demonstrates that it is difficult to regain their previous level of functioning after that type of fracture. So, it’s about helping them maintain their independence and safety.”



Advanced care planning

Advance care planning is another critical piece of the puzzle. The Optum care teams have in-depth, empathetic conversations with members and their families about where they are, what they value, what their wishes are, where they think they’re going and what their likely disease trajectory looks like.

“We’re kind of that quarterback in the middle pulling it all together and ensuring we’re all moving in the same direction,” Mello said.

“But it’s a necessary conversation and one that, when done in a compassionate way, can alleviate some of the unknowns for the patient and their family so that they can adequately prepare – both mentally and physically – for what the future might bring.”



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Care coordination

Making sure residents are getting all the help they need – both from Optum and other sources – is another pillar of the care model.

“Residents may not have the transportation resources to get to their doctor’s appointments, so to ensure they are keeping their appointments, the Optum plan will support them in securing resources so they can get to their appointments,” Babcock said. “We also work with the members and their community to ensure they are tapping into all other available resources.”

In Zeise’s case, Eaton worked with both Optum and Medicaid to get the extra help she needed to stay at home. Zeise now gets once-a-week help with laundry and cleaning from Medicaid, while Optum ensures she gets more medical care at home, including therapy, vision and dermatology exams, even mammograms. And her prescriptions are delivered right to her apartment.

“The ability to have a primary care provider and an Optum care manager provide services in her home is critical to her success,” said Sarah Schoeder, director of wellness initiatives for Eaton. “I no longer worry that she will have to move to a higher level of care due to the unexpected loss of her spouse, and for that, I thank Optum. She is very special to me.”



Benefits include:

- 24/7 clinical support
 - Outpatient therapy
 - Dental coverage
 - Mental health services
 - Vision benefits
 - In-home sitting services
 - Hearing aids
 - Prescription plans
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Chronic conditions support

Management of and support for chronic illness is a critical component of all senior care, and a key focus of the Optum care teams.

“We know chronic illnesses cause decline over time,” Babcock said. “Our clinical staff is proactive in managing those chronic illnesses, and work to get a plan in place that aligns with the members goals of care.”

Patricia Chace, a medical director in Iowa, Minnesota and Wisconsin, said even clinicians who come to Optum with a background outside of senior care quickly become experts in managing chronic illnesses.

Besides helping members navigate care across what are often multiple specialists, they educate them about their disease trajectory so they know what to expect and can plan the best care to fit their lifestyle and long-term care goals, she said.

“And it takes a certain kind of clinician to be able to do that, Chace said.

Multi-disciplinary care teams flex to meet residents where they are

The multi-disciplinary care teams, led by nurse practitioners or physician assistants, provide much more than a “peanut-butter-spread approach to care,” said Babcock.

“The model is based on management by an advanced practice clinician, but it’s so much more. If you have a lot of SDOH needs, we’re going to get you connected with the appropriate resource to mitigate those needs. Or if you’re more independent and you just need some help with medications, we’ll bring in an RN.

“What we bring is that ability to really meet the people where they are. If we need to go all in on SDOH needs, we’ll go all in. If they need chronic disease management, we’ll go there too. It’s flexing to what they need and meeting them where they are.”

“We have so many more screening and treatment options than we did 5 years ago,” Babcock said. “The overall disease trajectory looks different now and people can live longer, healthier lives with fewer interventions.”

Easing and preventing transitions for seniors

Helping residents age in place in senior communities is a two-fold mission: first, easing their move into senior living, then keeping them there. That’s why regular visits are such an important benefit.

“We’re looking for changes in conditions so we can help prevent unnecessary transfers to the ER or hospitalizations,” Babcock said.

And, when necessary, the teams work to get members who need extra care into skilled nursing – but only temporarily – because that, too, can prevent an unnecessary hospitalization, she said. And it’s easier to get them back to their independent or assisted living community when their doctors know they will have an Optum APC closely monitoring them.

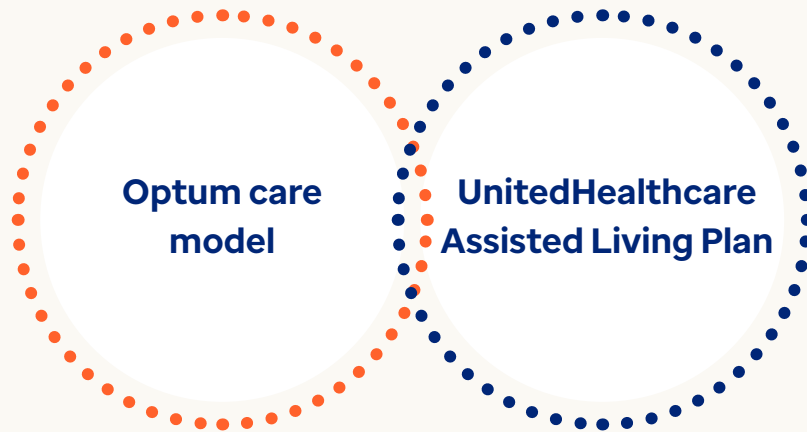
Ultimately, the Optum care model is all about transitions, whether it’s easing or preventing them.

“The big thing is understanding that going into a senior community is the first transition for a lot of seniors, kind of like sending your kids off to school for the first time” Babcock said. “We do everything we can to partner with the members and families to calm the anxiety and show there are all these resources that we’re going to wrap around your loved one to ensure that they have a smooth transition.”



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“Then we do everything we can to keep them in their new home and let them age in place; gracefully and on their time.”



The Optum care model and UnitedHealthcare Assisted Living Plan bring specialized health plan benefits, clinical support and expertise to residents in nursing home communities. The model is led by an advanced practice clinician who works one-on-one with residents to coordinate and support their physical and behavioral health care needs. Learn how this patient-centric model can benefit both you and your residents.

For more information, visit optum.com/alc.



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