

Loss and Theft in Senior Care Facilities

Question

Our senior care facility experiences problems with the loss and theft of residents' personal items. What effective measures can we put in place to try to prevent this from happening?

Answer

Preventing loss and theft in senior care facilities is challenging. When senior care residents experience the loss or theft of their personal possessions and valuables, it may have a profound emotional effect, especially for those who may have only a few personal possessions. These items may be the only symbol of their independence and connection to their previous lives. Other losses may significantly affect a resident's well-being, such as the loss of dentures or eyeglasses.

To deal with these situations, senior care facilities can undertake strategies such as establishing clear policies, marking items and keeping an inventory of residents' personal possessions, and employing an honest and dedicated staff. Below are specific considerations for preventing losses and possibly theft at senior care facilities:

- Establish an organizational policy on loss and theft, including reporting and investigation procedures, and post the policy in public areas of the facility.
- Perform criminal background checks (state and Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI]) on all prospective employees during the application process. Conduct additional background checks on a regular basis (e.g., every 2 to 5 years).
- Perform criminal background checks (state and FBI) on all prospective residents as part of the preadmission process.
- Orient new employees about loss and theft policies as well as reporting procedures.

- Require staff members to report to leadership any theft by other staff members, visitors, or residents.
- Educate staff about the importance of not protecting another employee who is stealing. Consider offering a reward or some type of incentive for employees who reveal information. Additionally, consider offering an anonymous reporting option.
- Inform staff members that facility leaders will report theft to the police and the ombudsperson to demonstrate the facility's serious commitment to theft prevention.
- Document efforts to control loss and theft at least twice annually.
- Create a written inventory of each resident's personal items during admission. Be sure to update the list if a resident discards and/or receives another personal item. Mark items with the resident's name, and leave markers at the front desk in case family members bring new items in for the resident that are not marked. Be specific when listing items in the inventory. For example, "black Nike tennis shoes" is more descriptive than just "shoes." Ensure that the resident or their responsible family member receives a copy of the inventory.
- Provide a personal locked space or a locker in each resident's room to store valuables.
- Photograph valuables in each resident's room for documentation purposes.
- Consider requiring residents' dentures to be engraved or tagging prosthetics with identifying information.
- Remind residents and staff members to be aware of the routine placement of personal items as well as to display visual reminders of lost items.
- Ask staff to be aware of which valuable items belong to which residents. Residents may sometimes misappropriate (borrow) items from other residents' rooms. Cellphones, jewelry, canes, etc. should be returned to the correct resident.
- Ask dietary staff to be alert for missing dentures left on dining trays after meals, and ask housekeeping staff to be alert for items that residents might inadvertently place in trash containers.

- For repetitive losses of items like dentures, hearing aids, or glasses, establish a procedure and document when these items are placed in an appropriate receptacle in the evening and returned to the resident in the morning. This procedure should help to narrow the search for any lost items.
- Give a staff member responsibility for lost and found items, maintain records on returned items, and help residents locate missing items. The records should indicate the date and time an item was discovered missing to help determine whether loss occurs repeatedly at a particular time. Information gleaned from these records may indicate whether a problem with theft exists.
- Display lost and found items in a central location so that residents or their family members can easily locate them. You may consider setting aside specific days of the month as “lost and found” days to be helpful to residents and families.
- Ask local law enforcement officials to provide in-service training sessions to staff members about the significance of loss and theft.

Resources

- [California Advocates for Nursing Home Reform: Theft and Loss](#)
- [Dr. Jim Collins: Theft in Senior Care and How to Prevent It](#)
- [Missouri State Long-Term Care Ombudsman Office and the Missouri Department of Health and Human Services: Loss & Theft: How to Prevent It and What to Do When It Happens in Long-Term Care Facilities](#)
- [National Consumer Voice: Theft and Loss](#)

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