

Laundry & linen management

Which model works best?

Tim Dixon talks to Paul Creek, an expert in aged care laundry operations, who has compared the three main models for managing and washing linen.



Paul Creek, Director of Creek Solutions

When Paul Creek undertook his Masters in Aged Care Management a few years ago, he chose to look at the 'pros' and 'cons' of three different models of laundry operations: the internally staffed on-premise laundry (OPL); the OPL staffed by external contractors; and the outsourced linen supply.

In the course of completing his thesis, Creek conducted a number of interviews and conversations with aged care and laundry industry experts – and along the way, he got to know the strengths and weaknesses of each model.

1. FULLY-STAFFED OPL

Unsurprisingly, both OPL models work best when the facility's site is big enough to house a laundry which can accommodate efficient workflows. It does however require a fairly high level of expertise and involvement.

"You need a person in a senior position within the facility who knows how to put the right systems in place," says Creek. "And while some senior nursing staff have a

reasonable knowledge of the laundry processes, others just close the door on the laundry and hope it works right. With all their other responsibilities, laundries just aren't always their priority – and they are the ones who have the problems."

One of the biggest advantages of this model is the flexibility it affords. Urgent requests can be met immediately and cost drivers can be completely controlled within the facility. Special items such as curtains, mop-heads, shower curtains and bedspreads can also be cleaned with little hassle and without adding greatly to the cost. This model often provides better feedback about the laundry process too, because the laundry workers are based on-

2. OPL WITH CONTRACTED STAFF

The best thing about using external staff to run an on-site laundry is that this model gives a facility a set cost for running its laundry operation, while still providing a fair amount of control.

"When you enter into one of these contracts, you know that you are up for a certain amount of money each month," says Creek. "It's great for planning and budgeting. The laundry will be owned and bought by the facility and the future costs can be calculated easily as well."

But he warns that homes which adopt this model will have to pay careful attention to the staffing contracts. Emergencies and

3. OUTSOURCED SUPPLY

According to Creek, the most compelling reason for outsourcing linen management in residential aged care is not having the space to run an OPL. He points out that even if the linen side of the laundry equation is managed externally, personal laundering will still need to be conducted in a small, on-site laundry.

Once again the biggest advantage of this model is that the costs can be determined from the outset. Another advantage cited by a number of aged care leaders Creek interviewed, was that it allows management to focus on their core business: providing care.

But this model offers the least flexibility of all. Creek suggests that for this reason, it is better suited to low care facilities where linen demand is lower.

"When you outsource the linen operation, you are really at the beck and call of the supply company. They do what suits them, not what suits you," he says. "You may only be able to call in linen every two days because they make money by keeping their turnaround to a minimum. The more pick-ups you have, the more expensive it gets and that may be inconvenient."

On the plus-side, external linen providers tend to have high quality standards.

IN SUMMARY

The main conclusion of Creek's paper was that regardless of which model is chosen, management has to play an active role in the laundry process.

"It was inconclusive as to which one was absolutely the best but each one relied on the management being in control and knowing what was going on," he says. "Each will fail if that is not happening." ■

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site and are 'part of the team'.

However these benefits can be the source of potential problems. If an OPL is always responding to urgent requests, it can end up running inefficiently. And the responsibility of selecting and managing staff can prove difficult too.

"If there is not enough supervision or interest from management, an internal OPL can become a unit unto itself," says Creek. "The key is that management has to be involved."

poor linen management at the 'ward-level' can easily incur extra costs.

"If you contract on 3.5 kilos per resident and then go over that amount, you will probably be paying for the difference," says Creek. "It will get done but it will cost you."

Creek also warns that contracted staff may be lower paid and have less loyalty to the organisation than employed staff.