"Robby the Robot" Delivers Meals, Saves Your Community $500,000 in 10 Years

By Pam McDonald

What do you think our current residents would do if "Robby the Robot" (or his 21st century equivalent) rolled up to their table in the dining room, placed a plate in front of a resident, and said (in an echo-y, noticeably metallic voice), "Good morning, Gladys, here's the breakfast you ordered. Enjoy!"

That's where my mind wandered while reading an article titled "Toyota Invests $14 Million in Aging-In-Place Robot". The short piece published last month in Home Health Care News (which you can read here), notes that the Toyota Research Institute has invested $14 million in an Israel-based firm, Intuition Robotics, that is developing social companion technology for older adults.

The company designed Elli-Q, an interactive, emotive device as an "active aging companion" for seniors living at home. Intuition Robotics recently opened an office in San Francisco and is testing Elli-Q there.

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Will senior living embrace robots and robotic technology? That's the question I asked David C. Koelling, President of Strategic Dining Services, an integrated, hospitality-based dining management company and Senior Housing Forum partner.

"Thirty years from now communities may have replaced their wait staff with robots and freed up labor resources for caregiving," David says. "But unfortunately it's going to take a while unless the industry begins to more readily embrace technology."

When consulting with new client communities, David often asks resident councils what they think about their dining room servers. He relates that they say, "I love Sally" or "I love Joe," but when asked about service they often say, "It's the worst. The food's not hot when it should be and I have to wait too long to get it."

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He points out that probably "only 25% to 30% of senior communities are using existing point of sale (POS) technology to improve residents' experience of their food service operation."

A basic system, which he highly recommends to communities especially while they're in development, could consist of 2 terminal screens in the dining room for servers and 2 printers in the kitchen. A runner would immediately deliver meals as soon as they come up and the wait staff would never leave the dining room.

"Right now that set up would cost about $5,000," David says. "Kitchens and dining rooms can easily be designed to accommodate that or other POS technology, allowing the chef and line cooks to focus on presenting residents what they are increasingly requesting – creative, handmade meals using fresh ingredients from the community's garden."

David also is quick to note the additional value of POS technology, saying, "It creates an accurate record of what foods residents prefer so you don't order salmon that then goes to waste. And, if there's ever a weight loss issue, family members can see every dish that was served to their relative."

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David is the first to insist that there will always be a need in senior living communities for human-to-human social connection. "That's what defines us as hospitality focused," he says. "It's what adds to the quality of life of our residents and, ultimately, of our staff.

"But, as a business, we also need to be bettering our product, delivering more consistency in our food and service, and finding efficiencies, especially in the ways we deploy labor. If a community reduced its wait staff by half a full-time equivalent, it could save $500,000 within 10 years."