

ASHA unveils ambitious five-year strategic plan

By Matt Valley

What began as a daunting, seven month strategic planning process for David Schless, president of the American Seniors Housing Association (ASHA), turned out to be a rewarding experience for him. More importantly, the newly unveiled five-year strategic plan will position ASHA for even greater effectiveness in the long run, says the veteran executive.

"It started in May and ended in January, but you could make the argument that it's just beginning," says Schless, referring to the comprehensive strategic planning initiative. "It was a remarkably time-consuming endeavor. At the same time, it was energizing to be part of the process."

The marathon strategic planning process, led by The Napa Group, began last April after discussions about a possible merger ended between the Assisted Living Federation of America (ALFA) and ASHA with the two groups deciding to remain separate.

More than 300 members at every level of ASHA were engaged in the strategic process through a combination of online surveys, committee meetings, subcommittee conference calls and webinars. Developers, operators, lenders, investors and other professionals all provided input. ASHA conducted two member surveys and even established a special strategic planning project webpage.

"We started from scratch. There was nothing sacred about what ASHA does," says Schless, who has led the association for the past 24 years. "ASHA has been a successful organization, but there are areas to improve. The membership identified areas of improvement and opportunities to fill real voids that haven't been addressed by other industry organizations."

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The updated strategic plan outlines five goals and objectives:

Launch industry promotional campaign. Educate the general public on the merits of senior living and shape perceptions of the senior living experience, supported by a digital network, website and social media;

Broaden the advocacy program. Deliver a coherent, coordinated legislative program at the federal level with increased focus and select engagement on state policy;

Bolster research efforts. Partner with a leading university to provide exclusive research on topics such as aging, healthcare, hospitality technology and real estate;

Foster leadership development. Develop a process for identifying prospective members and developing future ASHA leaders;

Restructure meetings. Revamp meetings to become more strategic, proactive and forward-thinking while better engaging, educating and informing members.

Following the association's annual meeting in January, Schless spoke with *Seniors Housing Business* about the five-year plan in detail:

SHB: How will the promotional effort be different than what the organization is doing now?

David Schless: The initial piece will be a significant investment by ASHA in a robust, content-rich website, along with social media and other public relations efforts. This will be a public service. Industry professionals have talked for years about the need to challenge common misperceptions about senior living. This will be a highly thoughtful effort to promote public awareness of the benefits of senior living. We believe when the website is fully built, it will be a tremendous resource for senior consumers, their adult children and other influencers in the decision-making process.



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The website will help people challenge conventional thinking about senior living, and we believe it can increase the penetration rate for our business. I'm sure it will feature a number of highly professional and informative videos featuring consumers, family members, and those who work in these communities every day.

While it will not be a directory of properties, we do absolutely intend to make sure that the site directly benefits our members who own and operate communities across the whole spectrum — from senior apartments and independent living to continuing care retirement communities to assisted living and dementia care. Some in the industry have talked about the need for a "Got Milk?" campaign. This may be a modern version of that, with social media, traditional public relations and a well-conceived and useful digital site.

SHB: Will the website include white papers?

Schless: The site will include a range of materials and resources that will help consumers. I'll give you an example. Last fall, we published a brief written by Rachele Bernstecker,

vice president of government affairs for ASHA, who has spent nearly 30 years in the seniors housing industry.

Rachelle wrote a beautiful and insightful piece about her first-hand experience finding a community for her mom who has Alzheimer's disease. The title of the Brief was "Why Compassion and Competency Matter: My Personal Journey As An Assisted Living Customer." It was one of the most powerful and important pieces I've seen in the 20-plus years I've been in the business because she wrote it from the perspective of the consumer.

I know our members found it valuable, and so too will consumers who are searching for assisted living and dementia care for their own parents. We have a terrific task force of industry professionals helping us conceive of this project, and we intend to soon select a top-rate agency to make this come to life.

SHB: Was there any feedback from ASHA members during the that surprised you?

Schless: ASHA has focused primarily on federal advocacy. That's a real strength of the organization and has been for the past 24 years. While our members recognize that ASHA does not have state chapters, they overwhelmingly want us to be helpful on state policy matters. That was particularly the case with owners and operators of communities. By using data as a part of the strategic planning process, we realized that our members believe ASHA should learn more about what is happening on state matters and to be helpful on state issues that are of great importance.

SHB: What's the impetus for the leadership development efforts?

Schless: Our membership is primarily comprised of senior executives who are involved in development, operations, and finance. The strategic planning process identified a real need to do a much better job of exposing ASHA and its resources to rising leaders in the industry. Although they are not in the C-suite now, they may well be in the next five or 10 years.

We will soon turn to our Executive Board members first and ask them to identify rising leaders in their companies. We plan to share many of our resources with these rising leaders and will develop some specific programming to help nurture and mentor the next generation of leadership.

SHB: What's the timeline for executing these initiatives?

Schless: The strategic plan covers a five-year time frame, from 2015 through 2020, and we have jumped into this with gusto. We began working on a few aspects of it last fall. So, we have gotten a running start, for example, on the industry promotion effort. But we have things moving in all of these areas and are excited about the possibilities to help advance the industry. ■

Valley, M. (2015, February-March). ASHA unveils ambitious five-year strategic plan. *Seniors Housing Business*, 28-30.