

Transforming aging:

An award-winning CEO inspires change

Moorings Park Communities’ Dan Lavender leads a culture of trust, innovation and measurable wellness outcomes

by Sandy Todd Webster, MSFS

This profile is part of ongoing Journal on Active Aging® coverage highlighting the senior living communities, wellness executives and wellness directors that have won the ICAA NuStep Beacon and Pinnacle Awards.

On any given day at Moorings Park Communities, CEO Dan Lavender might be walking the campus—not just to log points on his organization’s wellness app—but to connect, listen and remind “partners” (employees) across the company that successful aging isn’t just for residents, it’s for everyone. Over more than two decades of service and leadership at one of the most

innovative older-adult communities in the United States, he has quietly and meaningfully redefined what it means to lead with empathy, purpose and trust.

For Lavender, inspiration doesn’t flow from the top down. It flows in every direction. He doesn’t view leadership as a solo act of motivation, but as a dynamic, reciprocal exchange among passionate professionals. His approach upends the traditional “hero-leader” trope, instead highlighting the energy that comes from a deeply connected team. He sees his role as amplifying what already drives his colleagues—an authentic commitment to the mission of transfiguring how we age.

“The days where the leader goes up to the mountain and brings down the inspiration are kind of over,” Lavender says in his

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As CEO, Dan Lavender leads Moorings Park Communities in Naples, Florida, with a philosophy centered on an 'holistic approach to successful aging that enhances mind, body and spirit in every resident and team member'

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The Centers for Healthy Living on Moorings Park campuses integrate wellness and healthcare, 'blending fitness services, medical clinics and outpatient rehabilitation services'

plain-spoken manner during a Zoom interview in mid-April. “We inspire each other.”

In the heart of Naples, Florida, Moorings Park stands as a model of innovation in senior living, largely due to Lavender’s pragmatic, yet creative, approach. Under his guidance since 2009, the organization has expanded from a single community to three life plan communities—each deeply rooted in a culture of wellness that permeates every aspect of residential life.

Resources

Internet

ICAA NuStep Best in Wellness Awards (Beacon and Pinnacle Awards)
<https://beaconaward.icaa.cc>

International Council on Active Aging (ICAA)
www.icaa.cc

Moorings Park Communities
www.mooringspark.org

NuStep, LLC
www.nustep.com

The wellness values Lavender leads have been recognized and rewarded repeatedly. In 2023 and 2024, he received the ICAA NuStep Pinnacle Award, recognizing him among the top five wellness executives in North America. In addition, Moorings Park won the program’s 2021 award in the senior living category. The Pinnacle award highlights recipients’ exceptional achievements in wellness and goes to the top five communities that win the ICAA NuStep Beacon Award. In 2021, sister community Moorings Park Grande Lake claimed a Beacon Award, which salutes the top 25 “Best in Wellness” communities. Rounding out the honors, Moorings Park and Moorings Park at Grey Oaks won Beacon awards in 2024. [Ed. The International Council on Active Aging® and NuStep, LLC, introduced their joint awards program in 2019 and expanded it in the intervening years. See the website in the “Resources” sidebar to learn more about this awards competition.]

While the recognition is appreciated, Lavender isn’t one to seek the spotlight. His philosophy centers on a consistent, holistic approach to successful aging that enhances mind, body and spirit in every resident and team member.

At Moorings Park, this vision comes to life through emphasis on physical strength and

flexibility; preservation of cognitive function and memory; and fostering community through shared experiences. But in a modern business environment, where outcomes matter, these dimensions and ideals are underpinned by data. From personalized health metrics to participation tracking and cognitive assessments, data informs decision-making, ensures accountability and helps refine programming over time. This comprehensive, information-driven view of wellness isn’t just a department or an initiative but the very fabric of the community’s culture.

Vision rooted in experience

Lavender’s journey was shaped by an entrepreneurial spirit and deep experience in senior living. Early in his career, he and his wife launched a small business ahead of its time—what would now resemble a FedEx or UPS store. That venture taught him vital lessons about scale, competition and innovation.

“A good idea also needs execution and distribution,” Lavender reflects. “Once UPS and FedEx decided they wanted to [offer business services], we were not going to be able to compete.”

This chapter led Lavender into senior living, where he led finance and home health at respected organizations like Ohio Presbyterian Retirement Services and Methodist Elder Care Services. In 2006, a recruiter’s call brought him to Moorings Park, where he saw powerful possibility.

“They were going through succession planning, and I knew there would be an opportunity from within to be the CEO,” Lavender says. He landed at Moorings Park the same year and was named CEO in 2009. Today, nearly 20 years after his initial leap of faith, he guides Moorings Park with what his executive team leaders describe as contagious purpose and focus.

A 360-degree view from executive peers

Lavender’s sense of purpose was instantly apparent to Tom Mann, who joined the

executive team as vice president of marketing more than five years ago. At the time, Mann wasn't looking for a new job—he was quite happy in his role as a partner at Love & Company, a senior living consulting firm in Maryland. But when a recruiter called about an opportunity at Moorings Park, it caught his attention.

“As a consultant, I used to fly around the country talking to boards, and I had come onto the campus here and taken pictures of the Center for Healthy Living,” Mann recalls. “I’d tell clients, ‘This is who you need to be benchmarking yourself against.’”

What ultimately clinched Mann’s decision to join the organization was the company’s leadership and Lavender’s broad vision. “If this were just about the three communities we have, I wouldn’t have been all that interested,” Mann says. “But he sold me on the mission—to help change how America ages: Aging doesn’t have to be about decline; it can be an opportunity to find purpose, vitality and growth. And that’s been true every day since,” he shares. “I wake up every morning excited about getting out of bed because of that mission.”

Chief Operating Officer Katy Kurili echoes this sentiment. She joined the organization nearly six years ago, originally leading its newest campus as founding executive director of Moorings Park Grande Lake. “Even though I was a little removed at first, I still had a lot of touchpoints with Dan,” Kurili states. “To be honest, I joined Moorings Park because I had heard how wonderful Dan was—how at the core of everything he does, there’s a deep respect for the residents and a great appreciation for the people who work with him.”

Lavender’s leadership is hardly confined to the executive suite, Kurili adds. “You’ll see him everywhere—in our restaurants, resident councils, town halls, and board meetings. He’ll have lunch with one [resident] couple and dinner with another. He also rotates his time among leaders and takes the time to sit down with all of us.”

Like Mann, Kurili points to the organization’s evolving work around successful aging—a cornerstone initiative Lavender has embraced personally and professionally. “In the past six or seven months, I’ve seen so many strategic initiatives come to life,” she

says. “But that successful aging platform? It’s close to our hearts. And Dan leads the work in a way that fully aligns with our core mission.”

Wellness by design

At Moorings Park Communities, wellness is more than a department—it’s an intentional design principle. It’s embedded in every strategic decision, from facility planning to technology investments. This focus led to the development of Centers for Healthy Living on each campus, beginning with a 37,000-sq.-ft. facility in 2013. Each center blends fitness services, medical clinics and outpatient rehabilitation services, embodying the integration of wellness and healthcare.

That early commitment has only deepened. Today, approximately 6.2% of Moorings Park’s total operating expenses are devoted to wellness departments across its campuses. From one half-time consultant in 2008, the wellness team grew to 13 full-time equivalents by 2023. The program also supports a concierge healthcare model,

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Success with wellness

Moorings Park Communities’ CEO Dan Lavender shares some insights below about ways to support successful wellness cultures in senior living communities.

Integrating wellness. “In the senior living industry, we spend a lot of energy constructing new buildings and building new amenities. People often don’t think about the fact these developments will cost something—they’re an investment. You create a plan to make these investments work economically. Yet, some people have no problem building a new amenity for \$20 million but won’t fund startup losses of \$250,000 to build a great wellness program. One challenge we have as leaders is to figure out what’s important and to resource it. You can’t just add wellness on. You have to resource it.”

Generating revenue. “At Moorings Park communities, a portion of the monthly fees we charge to residents is allocated to

funding wellness programs and services. In addition, we receive charitable donations from residents who are passionate about supporting senior wellness. Certain ancillary services are offered to residents, such as personal training and spa services, and we reinvest the revenue generated from these services into supporting wellness programs and staffing.”

Navigating the landscape. “To determine what’s next, it’s necessary to continue to scan the landscape and make sure you are connected to and surrounded by people that are smarter than you. ICAA and LeadingAge are great examples. Read material. See what’s going on. As an example, through a partnership we set up with Johns Hopkins University in 2019, a geriatric fellow spends one year there and six months at Moorings Park. We’re about to have our sixth or seventh geriatric fellow. We started that relationship with Johns Hopkins talking about how we can not only take care of people when they get sick but also

set up ways to measure and improve their wellness, so they don’t get sick. I find like minds that are thinking even more along these lines and what the future of wellness will be, and we have deeper discussions about those things.”

Leading with authenticity and trust.

“You cannot generate authenticity. If you don’t believe in wellness or if you do it because it’s “an industry thing,” I don’t think you’re going to be successful. As a leader, you need to know what you believe and lead your organization where you believe. That’s important. Trust is also important. Trust is transparency, empathy and consistency. You have to be transparent. To have passion for whatever you’re trying to lead your organization to do. To have empathy, not only for your residents but also for the people working for you—to understand their challenges, and to take them with you. If you do all these things consistently, you’re going to succeed.”

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Tom Mann and Dan Lavender (first and third from left, back row) and Katy Kurili (second from right, front row) join Mooring's Park Communities' team Wellness Awards for 2024. Lavender received an ICAA NuStep Pinnacle Award honoring his exceptional wellness leadership. Two Mooring's Park campuses This award recognizes senior living communities that fully embrace wellness as a guiding principle

complete with physicians and a nurse practitioner, to deliver personalized care plans tailored to each resident.

Though many communities have doctors visit their properties, there are some key differences to the Mooring's Park model, according to Mann. Among those distinctions, Mooring's Park's concierge physicians work directly for the community. "As far as I know, we are the only senior living organization in the country with concierge doctors," says Mann. "They're not just affiliated; they report to us. And that makes all the difference when you're trying to create a fully integrated, holistic model. The real challenge most organizations face is closing the communication loop between the fitness team, the physician, the nutritionist, and the broader wellness staff."

Mann emphasizes that in many communities, the seven dimensions of wellness promoted by ICAA remain siloed. At Mooring's Park, by contrast, cross-discipline communication is encouraged *and* operationalized. "Instead of prescribing another pill, our physicians might prescribe a fitness plan," he explains. "Then the fitness team—who are all trained physiologists, not just staffers in a gym—can provide feedback to the doctor. The nutritionist is part of that same loop. It's a true team approach, under one roof."

Additionally, bringing all providers and specialists under a single umbrella has created something remarkably close to "the proverbial fountain of youth," Mann suggests. "When your doctors are outside your system, it's almost impossible to make it work," he says.

"They've got their own bosses, their own systems. But here, everyone is communicating—everyone is rowing in the same direction. We can't stop you from aging, but we can help you age successfully."

Looking ahead, Lavender envisions further integrating wellness with healthcare, moving from a reactive to a proactive approach. This includes personalized wellness plans, incorporating technological advancements like wearable devices and telehealth services, and fostering a lifestyle that allows residents to lead their best lives.

For those leading and working in the senior living sector, this integrated, holistic model—where data, purpose, design, and human connection converge—shows how wellness can be designed, measured and lived.



members to celebrate their ICAA NuStep Best in also each won an ICAA NuStep Beacon Award.

A dip in the data lake

Lavender is not only orchestrating a symphony of wellness at Moorings Park but is also a full participant. He integrates wellness into his own life with equal parts intention and innovation. For him, wellness is a constantly evolving practice, and one that requires attention to all the dimensions—from physical to emotional to spiritual.

“I’m a believer in measurements,” Lavender says, holding up his Fitbit and Oura Ring to the Zoom camera. “I use the Lose It app to log everything I eat. I’m intentional about sleep. I get my heart rate up. I weigh myself weekly. I also attend church—the spirit gets touched too.”

With such a metrics wonk at the helm, it’s unsurprising that Moorings Park is build-

ing the technical infrastructure to support deeper insight. “We’re building a data lake, which takes all these siloed systems and brings them together,” Lavender states. “It’s not just medical data—it’s nutrition, steps, wellness inputs. It’s all going to flow in. Then we’ll study it and get better at helping people live their best lives.”

A blueprint for purposeful aging

This layered strategy—tech innovation, robust staffing and integrated services—might explain how Moorings Park creates programming driven by residents, not just for them. As Kurili explains, “We started this amazing movement we call Meaningful Experiences. Residents created their own programs. They’re so accomplished. They’ve done things I can only dream of, and they’re generous with their talents.”

One standout example: A resident with connections to Johns Hopkins University has organized an annual live-streamed surgery and lecture series with some of the country’s top surgeons. Other residents lead current affairs seminars, host lectures, and train fellow residents in everything from technology to writing. “It’s lifelong learning, lifelong growth,” Kurili says. “It creates purpose and keeps everyone engaged and contributing. That’s a huge part of successful aging.”

Lavender observes, “To me, wellness is ‘How do you maximize your potential?’ And I don’t think there’s anything better in life than helping other people reach their maximum potential in anything that they’re doing.”

Taken together, Moorings Park’s approach offers more than a wellness program—it offers a blueprint. Lavender encourages others in the senior living space to think big. “You just have to keep scanning the landscape and surround yourself with people smarter than you,” he says. “That’s what I love to do.”

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Tying team wellness to culture and cost savings

While healthcare costs continue to climb across the United States—straining both employers and employees—Moorings Park Communities has taken a radically different path. Its employee health insurance program is built around a culture of wellness and engagement, offering a striking contrast to the national trend of rising premiums and limited access.

Employees can earn discounted—or even entirely free—health insurance coverage by participating in a comprehensive wellness initiative. From biometric screenings and preventive care visits to tracking physical activity, team members accumulate points that translate directly into savings. “If you get enough wellness points, and you’re a single person here, you don’t pay anything for your health insurance,” says CEO Dan Lavender.

The results are more than anecdotal. “Our health insurance performance is stellar. It’s off the charts,” Lavender notes, citing lower claims and improved health outcomes. Just as importantly, the program reflects the organization’s holistic commitment to successful aging—not only for residents, but for the team who supports them.

By embedding health and well-being into its operational DNA, Moorings Park demonstrates that a values-based approach to employee care is not only good ethics but also smart economics.

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Moorings Park Communities' Katy Kurili points to CEO Dan Lavender being a visible presence on the organization's campuses. Here, pictured at far right, Lavender attends a ribbon-cutting ceremony for the C&J Café in a Center for Healthy Living

High tech and high touch

Lavender is clear-eyed about the shift in healthcare culture toward prevention. He credits emerging thought leaders, science-backed insights, and a growing convergence of medicine and wellness as shaping the next decade of aging.

Wellness is no longer simply about physical fitness or even clinical health—it's about re-imagining aging altogether. "I don't think the definition of wellness has changed," Lavender reflects. "I think we kind of figured that out. But what I do see happening is we're getting a lot smarter about it. We're seeing more science-based proof every week. Medicine and wellness are moving closer together."

Lavender points to trends like the growing influence of the American College of

Lifestyle Medicine—now endorsed by the American Medical Association—as a sign that preventive, personalized care is becoming the new gold standard. "In 10 years," he adds, "[artificial intelligence] is going to be a factor in it. Technology—even our app and other apps—are going to help you get better with electronic data."

Such a tech-forward mindset is ushering in an exciting rollout this year. Moorings Park is preparing to launch a white-labeled wellness platform, an app that will act as the central hub for a resident's entire wellness journey. While the app name is still under wraps pending trademark approvals, its features are already defining the future. According to Mann, the platform will include everything from fitness calendars and personal training to massage appointments,

VIP services, travel planning support, and mental health check-ins.

"We've hired a whole new team for this," Mann says. "Jessica Brinkert, one of our own, was promoted to become the Executive Director of Successful Aging. And we'll also have Successful Aging Navigators—kind of like Sherpas—who help residents design and refine their personalized plans."

This combination of human connection and digital support reflects Moorings Park's belief that wellness is both high-touch and high-tech. "If everything works the way it's supposed to, you'll be able to pull up your pilates class in the app and then have it go right to your calendar," Mann explains. "You can also talk to your Navigator about

“When the time comes to pass the baton, Lavender hopes it won’t be noticed. The mission will simply continue, because the values will be deeply embedded in every person....”

lower back weakness, or how to cope after losing a spouse. That person helps you course correct. The human side is still vital.”

Where demand meets design

Moorings Park’s focus on resident well-being is good both for people and for business. Lavender points to high occupancy and retention rates, sustained expansion and robust financial credit ratings as proof that investing in wellness pays off. “We’re onto something people want,” he says.

With 97% occupancy across three campuses and a paid waiting list, demand for the Moorings Park model continues to climb. Lavender notes that, “as opposed to back in 2011 when we paid [residents] to be on the wait list...now we have a paid platinum and diamond list.”

According to Lavender, the company’s credit ratings are also impressive: “We are A+-rated by Standard & Poor’s. We’re A-rated by Fitch. That’s a pretty unique thing in the life plan community space.”

A legacy rooted in mission

As Lavender looks to a future where Moorings Park one day thrives without his direct leadership, he’s not focused on legacy in the traditional sense. Instead, he measures success by the consistency of core values,

the alignment of purpose and the culture of mutual inspiration he’s helped nurture. In fact, when the time comes to pass the baton, he hopes it won’t be noticed. The mission will simply continue, because the values will be deeply embedded in every person who walks through Moorings Park’s doors.

“Everything I’ve done might not have been perfect,” Lavender comments, “but it was filtered through what we’re trying to achieve—successful aging with empathy, compassion and professionalism for everyone we serve. I hope when it comes time for me to step away, that I will have set up this organization to continue down that path, and I will no longer be necessary. That’s what I want my legacy to be.”

Mann believes his CEO’s legacy will be one of leadership through people and innovation. He sees it shifting how the industry thinks about wellness. “A focus on wellness shouldn’t be a perk; it should be a promise,” Mann says. “And I think not only will Dan’s legacy be one of transformation of the organization, but one of transformation for the industry. People will copy many of the things Moorings Park is doing—and will do.”

For 22 years, Sandy Todd Webster, MSFS, was the Editor in Chief of IDEA Health & Fitness Association’s content—including the award-winning IDEA Fitness Journal and IDEA Food & Nutrition Tips—the health and wellness industry’s leading B2B resources for professionals worldwide. She is a Rouxbe-certified professional plant-based cook and a Precision Nutrition Level 1 Coach who recently completed a master’s degree in Sustainable Food Systems through The Culinary Institute of America. She combines these passions with evidence-based, practical journalism to continue inspiring others to make the world a more just, healthy and regenerative place. Visit www.sandytoddwebster.com for more information.

Images courtesy of Moorings Park Communities

Tearing down silos with shared mission

Cross-departmental communication is a common pitfall in large organizations. At Moorings Park Communities, CEO Dan Lavender actively works to build bridges across teams with structure, accountability, and a shared sense of purpose. “It is always a struggle—even in Moorings Park,” he admits.

To that end, Lavender’s team created a dedicated Successful Aging department charged with ensuring that wellness initiatives across all three campuses are documented, aligned with the organization’s mission, and consistent in delivery. “We bring people in from every department, and we look at key metrics,” he shares. “We celebrate success and discuss challenges openly.”

At Moorings Park, collaboration is a cultural cornerstone. Regular cross-functional meetings reinforce alignment, helping departments stay coordinated and focused on the broader goal: delivering exceptional outcomes for residents.