

Los Angeles Times

SUNDAY MORNING, JANUARY 7, 2001

It's never too late for roommates

West Hollywood organization helps provide seniors with alternatives to nursing homes or living alone

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WESTSIDE WEEKLY

Elsie Oeschler, Rose Noonan, Phyllis Edgecumbe and Keigoh Iwasaki never knew each other until a few years ago. They shared little in common except that they were all facing the dawn of their golden years.

But in spite of their differences, these unlikely housemates have become the closest of friends.

"It's been a lifesaver for me," Oeschler, 66, said of the Beverly-Fairfax area duplex she shares with nine other seniors. "This has been my second family."

With her savings completely drained, Oeschler had been living at a local shelter until she came into contact with Alternative Living for the Aging, a West Hollywood-based nonprofit agency, which was able to bring her together with Noonan, 82, Edgecumbe, 80, and Iwasaki, 67.

Started some 22 years ago, Alternative Living for the Aging helps self-sufficient, low-income senior citizens find an affordable alternative to retirement homes or nursing facilities.

"There ought to be something between living alone and an institutional setting," said Janet Whitkin, the agency's executive director. "Here you have the comfort of friends, but it's not regimented."

The agency achieves its



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Enjoying each other's company in the living room of their Beverly-Fairfax area home are housemates, from left, Rose Noonan, 82, Elsie Oeschler, 66, and Phyllis Edgecumbe, 80.

goals through cooperative apartment communities and a roommate-matching program. It has counseled more than 16,000 people and brought together nearly 7,000.

Scattered throughout the Westside, the cooperative apartment communities offer self-sufficient seniors a way to live independently with the knowledge that a safety net of friends is available.

"Here we have a lot of privacy and a lot of freedom," Noonan said.

Each tenant in the community-living setting has his or her own bathroom, but they share a kitchen, eat meals together and help each other run errands.

For example, Edgecumbe, who is the only ten-

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West Hollywood-based Alternative Living for the Aging may be reached at (323) 650-7988.

ant with a car, helped transport her friends during last year's bus strike.

"We're all basically on our own," Oeschler said. "But if anybody needs help, we help them."

Including utilities and five community meals a week, Oeschler and her housemates pay less than \$500 per month. Alternative Living for the Aging makes the housing affordable through a combination of city and county subsidies.

To get into the community-living program or the roommate-matching program, however, applicants must undergo a screening process to see if they are compatible with others.

"Not everyone is appropriate for shared housing," Whitkin said. "But for a lot of people, it's a great solution if they're getting lonesome."

Indeed, for seniors who are not ready to forfeit their independence but dread living alone, Alternative Living for the Aging provides an option not widely available.

"It's wonderful for seniors," said West Hollywood Councilman Sal Guarriello, a senior citizen himself. "When you lose someone, you can be lost."