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## *Pioneer Alternative to Retirement Homes Based on Self-Reliance*

# 10 in Senior Co-Op Face Everyday Life Together

By JOSH GETLIN, *Times Staff Writer*

First there was Co-Op I—a pioneering Los Angeles project where able-bodied seniors shared housing and daily chores as an alternative to a retirement home.

Located in the Beverly-Fairfax neighborhood, the two-story house was purchased with city funds and opened last May. Nine months later, residents say their living experiment has been a notable success.

Now, Co-Op II is on the way. The City Council last week approved \$386,000 in redevelopment funds to purchase a second cooperative home in the area, and sponsors hope to provide living space for up to 28 healthy, self-reliant seniors later this year.

Janet Witkin, director of the nonprofit Housing Alternatives for Seniors and a driving force behind the Co-Op projects, believes the

program could be extended to virtually any community.

"We're looking for people who are willing to take a chance on something new, to live and work together with others and form a special kind of living unit," Witkin said. "These seniors will be real pioneers, testing out an idea whose time has come."

Judging by the experiences of the first Co-Op House, the right mix of residents can produce a vibrant, good-natured environment where seniors do not have to give up their independence or mobility. Sponsors hope the same upbeat spirit will infuse their second project.

Witkin said the 10 residents of Co-Op I—ranging in age from 64 to 87—have formed a unique bond among themselves just by coping

with the challenges of everyday life. Their stories tell much about the alternative living arrangements that can be made available to the elderly:

—Recently, for example, the entire Co-Op household came down with colds at the same time. Residents handled the mini-epidemic well, keeping track of each other's condition and running errands for bedridden friends, Witkin said.

"They knew how each one was, that this person was improving rapidly, but that the person upstairs was still hacking away," she added. "The only problem was when Al (Kanter) gave Max (Gluskoter) a pill and knocked him out for three days."

—Earlier this month, the oldest resident of Co-Op I, Rose Becker,

had spinal surgery and spent two weeks in the hospital. When she returned, the residents went out of their way to provide care, bringing her dinner and ensuring that Becker, 87, did not have to ride a specially constructed elevator in the house by herself.

—Social relationships have developed rapidly among the residents. Al Kanter, 70, and Irv Laff, 86, have gone to neighborhood dances together, usually in Kanter's car. The two have returned from their outings with colorful stories, such as Laff's insistence that women have been coming up to him and asking if he has a life insurance policy.

—Since residents are assigned daily chores, they decided to elect

officers to keep the house running smoothly. Paulette Bertet, 72, makes coffee and enjoys cleaning tasks, but has resisted pressures to seek elective office. However, Nat Mirsky, a retired baker who makes pastries for his neighbors, was elected president with widespread support.

Witkin's organization worked hard to secure funding for Co-Op I, and is planning a June 23 fund-raiser for the new project. After it is renovated, the 20-year-old home will provide seniors with separate bedrooms and baths, but offer communal kitchen and living room space, as in Co-Op I.

Strong support for the projects has come from Councilman Zev Yaroslavsky, the city's Redevelopment Agency and the Community Development Department. Grants have also been received from the California Community Foundation and the state's Housing and Community Development agency.

### **Age, Health, Income Guidelines**

Witkin said seniors interested in applying for space in Co-Op II must be at least 62 years old and in good health and must meet low- to moderate-income guidelines.

City guidelines also require residents to pay a portion of their income for rent. Rents at Co-Op I average \$300 a month, which includes five meals a week and utilities. Witkin said rents at future projects will be higher, because of tight-money conditions.

Applicants can call or visit the Housing Alternative for Seniors offices in West Los Angeles, where their suitability for the Co-Op arrangement will be determined.

"We're looking for people who are comfortable with responsibility, and with a live-and-let-live situation," Witkin said. "Above all we're searching for seniors who can take care of themselves and want to be with other people. . . . That's the key to this whole project."