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Solutions for Seniors Housing That's Affordable

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"Let's eat!" announced Jeannetta Perl, as she hauled platters of steaming vegetables and roasted chicken into the cozy dining room at Co-Op One in Los Angeles' Fairfax district. The table, set for nine, brimmed with salads and side dishes, china and cheer.

The residents of the homey converted duplex, owned by the West Hollywood nonprofit group Alternative Living for the Aging, needed no prodding to begin the evening meal, the aroma of which wafted through the home's sun-dappled living room, adding warmth to the already convivial gathering.

"I love it here," Elsie Oeschler said. "We're like a family."

Oeschler, 68, and her housemates count themselves among the fortunate few who have managed to find comfortable low-cost housing amid an affordable-housing crisis that has left seniors in the Southland scrambling to find shelter.

With average one-bedroom apartment rents at \$1,089 in Los Angeles County and \$1,032 a month in Orange County, according to RealFacts, a Novato, Calif.-based firm that tracks apartment rentals in the western United States, seniors

whose sole income is derived from Social Security benefits increasingly find themselves jammed into tiny apartments or forced to impose on family members who often cannot deal with the special needs of aging parents or relatives.

"The general housing movement ignores elderly housing issues," said Jon Pynoos, director of the National Resource Center on Supportive Housing and Home Modification, at USC's Andrus Gerontology Center. "There always is talk about overcrowding and low-income people. But the needs of frail persons over 75... are huge."

In California, seniors who rely exclusively on Social Security benefits spend more than half of those checks on rent in 39 of the state's 58 counties, according to "Housing for Older Californians," a working paper published by the University of California's California Policy Research Center. Typical benefit payments for individuals living on their own are about \$750 a month.

"In L.A., many seniors can't afford to live even in dinky apartments," said Syed Rushdy, director of housing development for the Los Angeles County Community Development Commission. "Their incomes are fixed, and often they have no money left for food and medication."

Building Models for Independent Living

The problem will only intensify as the number of those 65 years and older in the L.A. metropolitan



For seniors who live at Co-Op One in the Fairfax district, rent includes five prepared dinners a week.

area grows to a projected 1.1 million by 2005, up 8.4% from 974,000 in 2000, according to 2000 U.S. Census data.

In an effort to ease the housing emergency, for-profit and nonprofit developers, often in partnerships with city, county, state and federal agencies, have built a variety of housing complexes for seniors which, although small in number, serve as models for independent living.

Among the more innovative is Alternative Living for the Aging, which allows seniors to enjoy a family setting, while maintaining their independence.

Long before the current affordable-housing crisis made the news, Janet Witkin, 55, realized the urgent need for decent living facilities for seniors. So in 1978 she established the organization that runs five cooperative com-

courtyard-apartment settings where residents live separately but agree to check in with each other under a buddy system, and others where residents have their own bedrooms and bathrooms, and share common kitchens and living rooms.

The group also runs a roommate-matching program that helps seniors find living quarters with others, or assists them in finding younger boarders who often help the elderly homeowners in exchange for rent.

Alternative Living for the Aging purchases buildings with help from federal tax credits, city and private funding. Rents range from \$385 to \$495 a month; the latter includes five dinners a week.

"I like the freedom here," said Harriet Dickerson, 80, an active Los Angeles real estate agent. "If I don't want company, I can close my door."