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## Seniors Increasingly Turn to the Roommate Option

■ **Aging:** Referral services aid older people in finding companions who help pay the bills and provide live-in companionship.

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George Hedden, a 100-year-old widower, was having trouble staying on top of the household chores at his two-bedroom Pasadena home. But when relatives suggested that he move into a retirement home, the energetic, retired railroad worker refused.

"I took him around to some, but unfortunately it was right after lunch and [the residents] were all falling asleep," his

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daughter-in-law, Kay Hedden, said. "He said they made him feel old."

So his family contacted Share a Home of Pasadena, a free roommate-referral service that caters to seniors. Within a matter of weeks, Hedden was matched up with Nick Olnig, a 70-year-old divorcee with a passion for golf, swimming and dancing. In exchange for free rent, Olnig moved into Hedden's home and took over the cooking, cleaning and grocery shopping.

What began merely as a financial arrangement blossomed into a strong friendship between the two men that lasted until Hedden's death last year—a day after his 101st birthday. Olnig lived on at his companion's home until his own death several months later.

"Nick was perfect. The whole family fell in love with him," Kay Hedden said, describing the yearlong relationship. "They were very compatible [even though] 'Grandpa' was not easy to live with."

Arrangements such as these are becoming increasingly common in Southern California, where record numbers of senior citizens are moving in with housemates who often start out as total strangers. Some jokingly refer to the trend as the



J. ALBERT DIAZ / Los Angeles Times

Marilyn Phillips, left, and Dorothy Mandel watch TV at their Beverly Hills apartment.

"Golden Girls" phenomenon, a reference to the television sitcom that revolves around the escapades of four 60-plus roommates in Florida.

In real life, the setting might as well be Southern California, which offers more shared housing programs for people 65 and older than any other part of the country, according to seniors rights advocates. "I think it's the high cost of housing in California that is fueling this trend there," said Leah Dobkin, a housing specialist for the American Assn. of Retired Persons in Washington. "But it's not just financial. Some people do it for companionship and security."

While the overall percentage of elderly residents sharing living space with non-relatives remains small, their numbers have increased by 67% since 1980. According to 1990 Census figures, more than

20,000 Southern Californians 65 and over are rooming with non-relatives.

And given the demographics of the region—currently, one-fifth of the region's population, or about 3 million people, falls between the ages of 35 and 49—many gerontologists predict that shared housing arrangements will become the wave of the future.

"There's a tremendous interest in this kind of housing right now because of the graying of America, particularly as we are looking at the baby boomers coming up in 20 years who will be senior citizens," said Janet Witkin, executive director and founder of Alternative Living for the Aging, a seniors' roommate referral service in Los Angeles. "We're going to have a real blow-up on the charts with a lot of people getting older and not having the economic resources to get by."

To help meet the current need, dozens of nonprofit agencies that specialize in matching up senior homeowners and renters with tenants of all ages have cropped up. In the Orange County area alone, for example, there are 15 such organizations.

The goal of the free services, funded through a combination of government grants and private donations, is to enable seniors to live independent, emotionally satisfying lives.

"Under the most ideal of circumstances, older people prefer living by themselves," said Rosalie Gilford, associate director of academic programs for the Ruby Gerontology Center at Cal State Fullerton. "But their psychological well-being, mood and life satisfaction is likely to be higher in shared housing than if they had to move in with a relative."

For many, shared housing is the only alternative.

Cliff Holiday, a board member for the Los Angeles County Affiliated Committees on Aging, often receives desperate telephone calls from retirees on fixed incomes worrying about how they will meet their skyrocketing expenses.

"I just talked to a Mrs. Davis the other day. Her rent goes up \$35 on the first of October and she says, 'There's no way I can keep this apartment at \$685 per month when my total income is less than \$900,'" said Holiday, 92. "So she asks me, 'What's the solution?' My suggestion is to get in touch with your senior center and they will put you in touch with someone in the same situation that can live with you. All you need is one room that you can rent out separately."

Just over a year ago, Dorothy Mandel found herself in a similar situation. Mandel, a senior citizen who asked that her age not be published, had lived for 11 years in a two-bedroom Beverly Hills apartment with her parents. But since their deaths, the \$700-a-month unit had become too expensive for her to afford on her own.

Eventually, Mandel contacted the Alternative Living program in Los Angeles, which put her in touch with Marilyn

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Phillips, a divorced woman who had recently moved from Oklahoma to be closer to her daughter and grandchildren.

"I had scoured the newspaper ads and I kept moving around staying with friends because I couldn't find anything for the rent that I could afford to pay," said Phillips, who also asked that her age not be published. "I was calling libraries and retirement homes and finally I got a referral to Alternative Living."

In a recent interview at the Beverly Hills apartment they now share, Mandel and Phillips described the difficult search that led to their current living arrangement.

"I had interviewed with about six people," Phillips said. "One of them had a nice condo in the hills but when she was showing me her apartment, she said the living room and the dining room were off-limits because she had all these heirlooms and she didn't want me to walk through that area. I knew I couldn't live like that, plus she wanted quite a bit of rent."

But Phillips persisted, and a month later, she met Mandel. After interviewing each other and

spending a trial night together, the two women decided to share.

"It's been a godsend," Mandel said. "And I have been rewarded because this little lady has become a part of my family."

In other instances, economics are only part of the story.

Some seniors who have outlived their spouses or longtime companions take a roommate out of loneliness. Others fear break-ins, or worry about falling down and not being discovered for days. Others, meanwhile, take on a tenant to help out with physically demanding household tasks.

"There's a lot of people in need of homes who are in some bad situations," said Rhonda Griswold, a dispatcher at a senior citizen center in Ventura. "People come in all the time looking for everything from a little help with their mortgage payment to full-time nursing care."

Although each home-sharing program is slightly different, most function primarily as referral services. Typically, would-be roommates are first interviewed by agency volunteers to determine their needs and expectations.

Prospective tenants are required to provide references and other

background information with their applications. Meanwhile, agency staff members usually visit the residence to make sure it is a suitable living space. After this initial screening, the agency determines which prospective home-sharers would be most compatible and puts them in contact with one another.

Winifred Shipman, 96, has rented out the two spare bedrooms in her Orange County home since her husband's death seven years ago. When her 83-year-old roommate died in June, she contacted the county's Senior Home Sharing program to help her find another tenant.

"I'd rather have a gentleman with a car who could take me once in a while when I have to go to the doctor," Shipman said. "It would also give me company during the day and I wouldn't be alone."

A San Diego senior, who lost her husband four years ago after 56 years of marriage, said she recently took on a 70-year-old female roommate for companionship.

Rachel, 82, who asked that her last name not be published, said she yearned for company in her three-bedroom house, especially at night. She charges her new roommate \$225 a month for rent, which includes use of the washer, dryer and kitchen.

So far, she says, the arrangement couldn't be better.

"She goes her own way and I go mine," Rachel said. "I have some friends who just lost their husbands and I tell them, get someone. Everything is half and you will have someone to talk to in the evening and watch movies or whatever."

Like Rachel, many older women prefer other women as roommates, while men also tend to prefer living with women—a factor that sometimes makes it more difficult for agencies to place men.

"Most of the ladies want another lady because they say they spent their lives taking care of a man and now they want a friend that can go out with them and who won't expect them to wait on them," said Patricia Woodruff, director of Shared Housing—A Riverside Experience for Seniors and Others Inc. "If we had Mrs. Olson from the Foiger's commercial we could place 50 a month of her. She's obviously got a little money. She's always busy. She would be the dream candidate."

But just as with any roommate situation, there are no guarantees—especially when the participants come from different generations.

A few months ago, Wilma Godfrey, 88, selected a 29-year-old male college student to share her Pasadena home. Godfrey, a widow, needed someone to mow the large lawn. She also felt she needed more human contact because she often found herself talking to her dog.

But now, Godfrey says, she is wondering whether she made a mistake. She has found some of her roommate's habits, such as showering several times a day, difficult to accept.

"There's quite a difference in 88 and 29 and I realize that. I remember growing up and I'd actually pray I'd be a pleasant old lady," she said. "But to have someone come in and do something that makes you hold your breath—it's a little hard to get adjusted."