

# Home Sharing Working For Today's Seniors

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senior home sharing  
programs provide  
companionship,  
security and  
financial assistance.**



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Dorothy Mandel and Marilyn Phillips find that home sharing is the way to go. "We are very compatible," says Mrs. Mandel. "But this is like any other relationship—you have to work at it."

Sometimes, all it takes a is little creative thinking for a senior to remain independent.

Take the case of Mrs. Smith.\* Alone after her husband died, she remained in her home for many years. As time wore on, however, she found it more difficult to do the things she had always done for herself—cooking, shopping, navigating the stairs. The expense of keeping up the house also had cut significantly into her income.

Some help and companionship would be a plus, she thought. But she certainly did not want to enter a nursing home. Nor could she afford the often high fees for "seniors only" assisted living communities.

*\*Name has been changed to protect privacy.*

For Mrs. Smith—and for thousands of other seniors across the country—the answer is home sharing, an innovative living arrangement which combines security, companionship and economy with independence and a real home.

Home sharing can take many different forms. Some seniors may offer a room to a college student in return for light housekeeping, cooking and companionship. Others may opt for a group house, where several seniors share the household responsibilities. Or, two seniors with compatible tastes and interests can become "roomies."

Whatever the arrangement, home sharing is quickly gaining ground as a reasonable living alternative for today's seniors.

## **MATCHMAKER, MATCHMAKER**

Home sharing is an idea whose time has come.

So say the thousands of seniors across the country who find home sharing a solution to their financial, social or health problems. This is especially true, they say, in light of diminishing housing options for seniors who wish to remain independent.

It was this lack of options which prompted Janet Witkin, a former teacher, to found Alternative Living for the Aging in 1978.

"As a teacher, I took some of my students to visit board and care homes for seniors, and I was appalled at what I saw," Ms. Witkin recalls. "I believe older persons should have alternatives to institutionalization, and that's when I came upon the idea of a housemate matching program."

Since its inception, her organization has brought together more than 4,800 Southern California seniors through the program's housemate matching service.

The matching process begins with an in-depth personal interview, both of the provider—the person with the house to share—and of the seeker—the person in search of a housemate or group house.

Although programs differ in how they match up potential home sharers, most, including Alternative Living for the Aging, look at many variables. Financial ability, location preferences, hobbies, personal habits such as smoking or alcohol use, diet and other factors are considered. Also examined is whether the provider will need assistance with cooking, driving or household chores. Hopefully, individuals will be matched with partners with similar preferences or who can meet the needs of the other, says Ms. Witkin.

After the initial interview, the two potential housemates meet and get

to know one another. Sometimes this involves an overnight or weekend stay to make sure the sharers are compatible, Ms. Witkin says. After that, they are on their own, although some matching services occasionally check in on the new housemates for several months to make sure all is running smoothly.

## **SUCCESS STORIES**

Although little research has been done on senior home sharing, one study was done by Jon Pynoos, Ph.D., an associate professor of gerontology and urban planning at the University of Southern California, and his colleagues. Most seniors searching for housemates do so at least partially to ease financial burdens, they found.

That's what initially brought Dorothy Mandel and Marilyn Phillips together.

Both wanted to live with someone with whom they could share expenses. But Ms. Mandel always had lived with others; Ms. Phillips had always lived alone.

But that difference posed no problem for the duo. They found that a few guidelines were all that were needed to make life simple and pleasant.

"We are very compatible," says Ms. Mandel, 75. "We set up a few simple rules and we respect each other's privacy. But this is just like any other relationship—you've got to work at it."

Ms. Phillips agrees.

"We have separate baths and telephones, we share all the

**For further information on home sharing, contact your local area agency on aging or senior center, or for a copy of the "Resource Guide on Shared Housing," write to the National Resource and Policy Center on Housing and Long-Term Care, Andrus Gerontology Center, University of Southern California, University Park, MC-0191, Los Angeles, CA 90089-0191.**

chores and we have our own schedules when it comes to meals," she says. "The arrangement took a little getting used to, since I was used to living alone. Privacy is very important to me, and Dorothy respects that."

Ms. Mandel and Ms. Phillips have found that home sharing not only saves them both money, but they have grown to be fast friends, as well.

When Ms. Phillips decided to go back to school after she turned 65, Ms. Mandel was proud and supportive. They go to movies and to restaurants together, and sometimes Ms. Mandel's family invites Ms. Phillips along on family outings. And both appreciate the comfort of knowing someone is around, just in case.

"If one of us is ill, the other is there to get food or medicine," says Ms. Phillips. "And when the big earthquake hit [in January 1994] it was very comforting to have Dorothy there."

It was the need for companionship—and some help around the house—which



Milton Tepper tells potential housemates that a good attitude is the most important thing.

prompted Milton Tepper, 80, to find a housemate. Instead of seniors, however, his housemates all have been college students in need of room and board.

Ten years ago, his wife had a stroke while he was away. If it hadn't been for the piano tuner who was in the house at the time, it could have been hours before he found out about his wife's condition. Although Mrs. Tepper passed away a few months later, the thought of that day remains with him.

"I realized, with my sons away, they could call for four or five days and not know anything was wrong. What would happen to me if I had a stroke?" says Mr. Tepper. "Besides, I didn't want to give up my house. I enjoy living here because it's comfortable, conveniently located and it reminds me of my wife every day."

So Mr. Tepper turned to the University of Southern California's gerontology center, where he was a volunteer, and they helped him find

a student who was willing to cook, clean and do some heavy lifting in exchange for a room in his house.

Over the years, he has had a number of boarders, and he has remained friends with several.

"I tell them at the beginning, 'If you or I don't like this arrangement, we'll break it off—no questions asked,'" he says. "A good attitude is the most important thing, but refusing to compromise can ruin the relationship."

## FINDING THE PERFECT MATCH

Seniors interested in home sharing should first consider exactly what they expect from the relationship, experts say. Is companionship the main goal? Or sharing of financial responsibilities? Or help with chores?

Other questions to be considered: How do present lifestyles mesh? Are both early risers? Does he or she entertain often? Does he or she smoke or drink? What about pets? What is a housemate expected to contribute to the relationship?

The next step is to find potential housemates. Often, area agencies on aging, or a local senior center or university can direct you to home sharing services in your area.

After meeting a potential housemate, the final step should be development of a written agreement on various aspects of the arrangement, say experts at the Cornell University Department of Consumer Economics and Housing. Topics might include rent, household chores, utilities, meals, guests, insurance and terminating the agreement.

The agreement should spell out legal rights and obligations of everyone involved, they say. It will not only serve as a guide to help solidify what each party expects, but will also help prevent misunderstandings in the future. ☐

—by Trudi Jo Davis

Call (213) 650-7988 for more information