

Shared Living-Welcome Home

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According to census data, 27% of people over age 65 live alone, compared with 10% of the total domestic population. Annette Leahy Maggitti, co-president of the National Shared Housing Resource Center, said that interest in shared housing has grown since the economic downturn. A similar program in Baltimore has matched 102 pairs of people in 2010. HomeShare Vermont, a matching service for home sharing, saw an increase from 54 matches in 2008 to 76 in 2010. The most common reason seniors give for renting out a room is financial. Older people, some living alone for the first time, feel happier and less anxious after a home sharer moves in. Simply living with someone who can drive, do household chores and provide simple caregiving can help seniors remain independent longer.

Here's a story of how the need arises. In the early hours of the morning, Anna Novak, 81, got up to use the bathroom in her home in White Plains. She fell, hitting her head and left arm against the bathtub. Antimina Garmley, a 65-year-old retired nurse who has lived with Mrs. Novak since July 2010, awoke in the next room. She jumped out of bed and ran into the bathroom. Kevin Novak, her son, also heard his mother's calls and hurried across the hall.

Tragically, Mrs. Novak had broken a finger, dislocated her wrist and gashed her left eyebrow. After her son picked her up off the floor, the nurse bandaged her head, they drove her to the hospital. Ms. Garmley, the retired nurse, and Mrs. Novak had met through a home share program for seniors at Westchester Residential Opportunities in White Plains. At the same time, Mr. Novak, 43, was increasingly concerned about leaving his mother at home alone. Feeling isolated, she had moved back to White Plains from rural upstate New York a couple of years earlier. As her son travels, she grew anxious in his absence and complained of being lonely.

After Ms. Garmley moved into the spare bedroom, the effect on the older woman's mental health was immediate. Mrs. Novak says, "I used to be very down and out, worried and depressed, and I'm not so depressed when she's here. Because I know she can do things I can't do." The two women's relationship sometimes resembles that of a nurse and patient, sometimes that of relatives. Ms. Garmley's mother died when she was young and refers to Mrs. Novak as "mother." Mrs. Novak said they have been mistaken for sisters when shopping.

"Interpersonal relationships often pose the greatest challenge for home shares, particularly since seniors may never have lived with roommates. The homeowner has to realize that there is some compromise on their part, some loss of privacy," Ms. Maggitti said. Other challenges include municipal statutes that discourage unrelated people from living together; and, lack of knowledge about home sharing.

While not limited to just seniors, more and more seniors are experiencing benefits from this arrangement. The benefits of homesharing include continued independence, rental income, household help, transportation, safety, companionship, and peace of mind for the senior and their out of state families. States that have home share matching include New Jersey, Florida, Illinois, and Virginia. Use this Web link to search for other states, <http://www.nationalsharedhousing.org/directory.html>.