



Living Together



Two alternative-housing options offer more companionship and security for older retirees

By Wendy Haaf

Collaborative living arrangements, in which people help and support one another, are as old as humankind, but two relatively recent twists on this ancient idea, adapted for our North American, nuclear-family-centred, privacy-loving society, are proving attractive options for a small but fast-growing number of Canadian retirees.

Home Sharing

Slim and fit, Vera Gartley is a poster woman for healthy, vigorous, post-retirement living. At 80, she looks at least 15 years younger and, in fact, only recently got around to giving up her career as an art professor. Nonetheless, she has begun to find a few of the tasks involved in keeping up her Calgary home more difficult. “The yardwork is a little bit too heavy for me,” she says.

Likewise, Elaine Williams,* 88, also of Calgary, was beginning to notice that “the vacuum cleaner was getting heavier” while cleaning her five-bedroom home. What’s more, when her husband died last year, she lost more than a cherished companion: he’d done much of the yardwork. Williams didn’t know how much longer she could manage alone or “if I could af-

* Name changed for reasons of privacy.

ford to stay here” if she’d needed to hire help.

Enter Calgary HomeShare, a program that was at that time a pilot project (launched in March 2010) of the Calgary Seniors’ Resource Society, with funding from the United Way and other foundations. One of only three such services in Canada, HomeShare was looking for senior homeowners willing to house adult students in exchange for four to 10 hours a week of household services such as gardening, snow shovelling, cleaning, or simply keeping an ear out for a homebound homeowner with a disability so his or her spouse can run a few errands or go to a movie. (Home-sharing programs are much more widespread in the United States: the website for the US National Shared Housing Resource Center lists links for more than 50 different programs, not all of which are aimed specifically at seniors.)

“HomeShare isn’t a landlord/tenant arrangement; it’s a cost-sharing/roommate type of situation,” explains Cheryl Snider, Calgary HomeShare manager. “And the agreement between the two is not only financial, it’s also a commitment of time by the home seeker.”

Home seekers, who would undergo a vetting process including a police check, were also to pay a portion of the cost of utilities and a deposit that could be used to hire someone else to perform household tasks should the home seeker be unable to fulfill his or her work commitment. To provide a sense of the preferences and personalities of each party, applicants on both sides of the equation each filled out a questionnaire and met with the program manager for a personal interview.

Williams was matched with a young South American woman she describes as “a lovely lady,” who gamely learned to shovel snow and who also pitches in with lawn mowing, cleaning, and other chores. Admittedly, Williams was used to living with people who were strangers, having rented rooms to students for 40 years, so she’s used to making al-

lowances for others, but the only flaw she can find in her new friend is that she’s very soft-spoken, and Williams, who wears two hearing aids, sometimes finds it difficult to hear her voice. Otherwise, she says, “she’s delightful. I’d highly recommend the program; it’s been a very positive experience.”

While Gartley was no stranger to space-sharing, either (she, too, had rented out rooms to students, and, when studying for her most recent degree in her 50s, she lived in residence), she and her new living companion got off to a slightly more faltering start. Gartley says it took a little while for the relationship to find its feet, in part because she was unsure whether her role was that of a landlady, roommate, mentor, or employer. Initially, she had trouble communicating what kinds of tasks she wanted accomplished, a problem that was ultimately solved with a list of set chores and a system of leaving Post-it-Notes for more urgent requests. “It’s a learning experience,” she acknowledges.

The situation has worked out so well that Gartley asked the woman if she

wanted to stay on after graduating. Among the other advantages is that, when Gartley travels, as she did to India for six weeks in 2011, “I have a house-sitter right here,” she says.

One of her friends has had a similarly good experience with Calgary HomeShare. “She says it’s worth it just to have somebody who comes up every morning and greets her,” Gartley says, evidently a sentiment shared by many other participants. “When we did a focus group, a lot of the homeowners said what they really enjoyed was the companionship, even though they hadn’t anticipated or expected that,” Snider notes. Perhaps that’s why the arrangement didn’t work out for one of Gartley’s neighbours, who was matched with a student who didn’t spend much time at home.

It seems, then, that companionship is one of the factors that’s helped drive the surging success of the program. The first owner/seeker pair was matched in January 2011, and by February “it became quite evident that the demand was much more than one program manager could

HomeShare was looking for senior homeowners willing to house adult students in exchange for four to 10 hours a week of household services.



cope with on a half-time basis,” Snider recalls. “When the pilot finished, it was decided that it was an idea that was worth pursuing, and that we should become a full program of Calgary Seniors’ Resource Society,” she adds. The United Way committed to two more years of funding.

Based on feedback from a post-pilot evaluation, the program has expanded and has now been opened to non-student home seekers.

“We realized that by focussing specifically on adult students, who naturally want to live near where they’re going to school, without intending to do so we had essentially eliminated a significant number of seniors,” Snider explains. “And, of course, we had some students who were graduating and saying, ‘I really like HomeShare.’ We’ve also had a fair number of home seekers who are seniors themselves, who learn about the program and say, ‘I’d like to live with somebody else, but I don’t have my own space to share.’”

“So far, we’ve had a total of 43 matches, and we’re aware of another 11 seniors and three students who decided to go ahead and make arrangements of their own. To me, that’s just as great an example of the success of the idea.”

Snider also fields regular inquiries from other parts of the country, either from adult children looking into the program for parents living in Calgary or people wanting to know whether similar services exist in their communities. (Snider is aware of only one other such program: Outaouais shared housing in Gatineau, QC. But there’s another, Yamaska shared housing, in Granby, QC, and a group in Saskatoon has expressed interest in trying to get one off the ground.) “We’ve learned all kinds of things,” Snider says. “The program is not for everyone—for instance, some people need more services than can be provided through HomeShare—but it works really well for people who are interested. It’s been a lovely ride, actually.”

While it’s relatively new to North America, co-housing—senior co-housing in particular—is very popular in Europe, particularly Denmark, where the idea originated almost 50 years ago. And interest appears to be growing rapidly, especially among the over-55 set. When Margaret Critchlow, co-founding director of the Canadian Senior Cohousing society, held an information meeting on the subject, she expected a turnout of perhaps 10 people; five times that many showed up. Another 24 signed up for two more intensive study groups she ran for several weeks over the summer. And when she started a website as a way of getting information out, the next thing she knew, it had 1,500 subscribers.

In North America, about 130 co-housing developments have been completed since 1991, and another 188 are in various stages of development.

Wolf Willow, in Saskatoon, is reportedly the first retiree-focused co-housing community in Canada, though several others—including West Coast Senior Cohousing in Sooke, BC, and a rural project outside of Calgary—are in the planning stages.

Co-housing

When shopping for a new residence, most of us begin by choosing a community or neighbourhood, or making a must-have list of home features. But that’s not the case for people who opt for the living arrangement dubbed co-housing; they select their neighbours first, then go about building homes around the community they’ve created.

“It’s an alternative development model, in that the future residents are the developers,” explains Ronaye Matthew, a co-housing consultant in Burnaby, BC, and a resident of Cranberry Commons, an intergenerational co-housing community there. “They finance the project and hire professionals to help make it happen. The resident group is involved in the development and design process and has the opportunity to talk directly to the professionals—the engineers and architects—and to explore things they would like to include in their building.”

Co-housing projects are essentially owner-developed condominiums with self-contained homes and more-extensive-than-usual common amenities that can include communal kitchens, work-



shops, studios, and gardens. Co-housing groups typically form around shared values or interests (more on those later), making co-housing a type of intentional community. What sets co-housing apart, however, is a democratic decision-making structure and a strictly defined level of interconnectedness; for example, there’s no income-sharing, as there might be in, say, a commune.

So what are the ideals that bring a co-housing community together? “The biggest motivator and value that people share is a belief that having more connection with their neighbours is going to enhance the quality of their lives,” Matthew says. The physical layout of a co-housing community provides ample opportunities to socialize, balanced with privacy. (In fact, if you’re an introvert with a very sociable partner, co-housing can offer extra peace and quiet: he or she can meet friends in the common areas, rather than always bringing people home.) These qualities may make co-housing particularly beneficial for older people, helping them to remain mentally sharp, healthy, and relatively independent: studies have linked strong social connections with a reduced risk for dis-

Photo: iStockphoto/igphotography.



eases ranging from dementia and heart disease to cancer. Plus, the proximity of others makes it easy to extend, or reach for, a helping hand when necessary.

“When my neighbour, who’s now 90, broke her shoulder a few years ago, there was a member of the community who could drive her to emergency, stay with her, and bring her home,” Matthew says. (It’s worth noting that this neighbour is one of a number of residents over 80, all of whom play active roles in the community.) “Then the community did her shopping for her and cooked her meals until she was able to care for herself fully again. It was no hassle; she lives upstairs. When I’m cooking, I can easily do an extra portion and then walk up there. We can coordinate that amongst ourselves in a very easy and natural way.”

The same goes for exchanging favours such as house- or pet-sitting, computer tech support, and gardening. “There’s always someone here who’s willing to help you,” says Joanne Keelan, a resident of Creekside Commons, an intergenerational co-housing community in Courtenay, BC. (By contrast, when Keelan lived in a Vancouver condo, even though she was known to many residents because she sat on the council, many of her neighbours wouldn’t even say hello.)

“I think what co-housing offers is companionship: you end up with people who are very like-minded,” says Pam Monroe, a founding member of Creekside.

The cozy quarters, extensive communal amenities, and ability to have a say in how the actual buildings are constructed enables co-housing communities to reach another commonly held goal: minimizing one’s environmental footprint.

“That was very important to us,” says Margo Day, one of the co-founding members of Wolf Willow, a retiree-focused community in Saskatoon with an eclectic mix of members that includes writers, musicians, builders, clergy representing several religions and denomina-

tions, openly gay and lesbian people, and a retired midwife. Communal craft rooms, workshops, and workout facilities reduce the need to replicate such spaces in each home, so houses are more compact and therefore consume less energy. Because residents are involved in the design process, and therefore not dependent on a developer, they can choose to invest in much more environmentally sound, sustainable materials and design features than those you’re likely to find in a typical home. (Eliminating a developer—who needs to make a profit—also curbs costs, so the savings can be sunk into bricks and mortar.) For example, at Wolf Willow, all the windows are triple-glazed, Day says, and the buildings themselves are strategically situated for maximum passive solar exposure.

Having a hand in design choices also allows co-housing communities to incorporate features that would allow a resident to continue living at home even should he or she develop mobility problems in future. For example, at Creekside Commons, all units are stair-free on the main floor, with wide doorways, and grab bars in the bathroom; an upstairs bedroom could potentially accommodate a live-in caregiver. “It’s really great,” says Keelan, who has a neurological condition that sometimes affects her balance.

In short, it’s hard to imagine a living arrangement more ideally suited to socially conscious retirees who want to stay in their homes and communities as they grow older. “It’s a way of being proactive,” says Margaret Critchlow, co-founding director of Canadian Senior Cohousing and a founding member of the West Coast Senior Cohousing group in Sooke, BC. Now 64, the retired anthropology professor and her family once lived in Vanuatu, a South Pacific island nation comprising tiny communities where decisions are made by consensus—an experience she says piqued her interest in co-housing.

“I would say the boomer population has been a driving force in getting co-housing communities going,” Matthew

says. “They come from the ’60s mentality that inspired ‘Imagine’ by John Lennon. This is the world they want to create, and, as they age, they’re realizing that they actually have the economic power and resources to make it happen.

“People often say co-housing isn’t for everybody. Well, I actually think it is. Learning to live together in closer contact and higher density with each other in this kind of lifestyle allows us to reduce our footprint and enhance our quality of life at the same time. And I do believe there’s a place in the community for everyone, even people who don’t like people very much, because you don’t have to socialize, but you have opportunities for different forms of connection that can suit your personal needs and interests.”

Having watched her husband’s parents have to move from their farm to a community and, finally, to a nursing home, Day says, “we kept thinking there had to be a more graceful way. The idea [behind Wolf Willow] is to age in place, surrounded by friends who love and care for each other, being as vibrant as we can possibly be.” ■

Resources

Co-housing

Creating a Life Together: Practical Tools to Grow Ecovillages and Intentional Communities, by Diana Leafe Christian. New Society Publishers, 2003.

The Senior Cohousing Handbook, 2nd edition, by Charles Durrett. New Society Publishers, 2009.

Canadian Cohousing Network
www.cohousing.ca

Canadian Senior Cohousing
www.canadianseniorcohousing.com

Fellowship for Intentional Community
www.fic.ic.org

Home Sharing

(US) National Shared Housing Resource Center
www.nationalsharedhousing.org

Homeshare International
www.homeshare.org