

Interest in aging in place, as long as possible, remains high

By **AMANDA RENKO**

Aging in place remains a popular option for older adults, despite the challenges the COVID-19 pandemic has presented for seniors who wish to remain in their homes and communities.

Senior-focused agencies in the Rochester area have reported challenges providing services to clients who need assistance at home, while builders focused on the aging population have struggled with cost increases and labor shortages. However, interest in aging in place remains high, especially as strict limitations on visitors to congregate senior living facilities persist in New York state.

Studies have shown that seniors strongly prefer to age in place. About 76 percent of respondents over 50 in a 2018 survey by the American Association of Retired Persons said they wanted to stay in their current homes for as long as possible. COVID has only increased that interest, said Jim Albright of Albright Remodeling in Canandaigua, which specializes in projects that allow seniors to age in place.

Since the pandemic began, “we’ve had about a 45 percent uptick in inquiries from people about moving their parents in with them,” Albright said. He’s also heard from real estate agents who have a waiting list of those seeking houses with spaces adult family members can live in, such as in-law apartments.

Despite the increase in calls, Albright has advised his clients to wait to move forward with projects if they can. He’s seen a cost increase of over 60 percent on materials due to pandemic-induced shortages, and a lack of skilled tradespeople has meant not enough construction crews to go around.

Labor shortages have also affected Catholic Family Center, which contracts with home-care aide agencies to assist older adults who wish to remain in their homes but need help with day-to-day tasks. The Rochester area had an aide shortage even before the pandemic, but COVID has exacerbated the gap, said Jennifer McDermott, CFC’s director of aging and adult services.

“We have a lot of people who are waiting for aide service because the agencies just do not have the staff available to fill all the orders,” McDermott said. Additionally, many clients were uncomfortable with having regular outside help come to their home at the height of the pandemic, she said.



Susan Bussey, senior vice president of housing at Jewish Senior Life. (Provided photo)

In response, CFC increased the amount of one-time services it offers, including house cleaning and laundry, for those who were reluctant to receive regular assistance. Susan Bussey, senior vice president of housing at Jewish Senior Life, said the organization experienced a significant increase in demand for its companion care service, which provides non-medical assistance with daily activities. Companions are subject to the same stringent standards as all Jewish Senior Life staff — they receive COVID tests weekly and wear masks and face shields while making home visits.

The organization’s home visit medical practice, Physician House Calls, has continued to be a popular option, said Dr. Marie Aydelotte, vice president of medical services and chief medical officer. Clients “don’t want to go out into the community, to waiting rooms and that type of thing,” she said. “We haven’t grown a lot, but we’re seeing a lot of inquiries.”

Jewish Senior Life’s assisted living facilities saw a decline in population over the summer months, largely because of statewide visitor restrictions. Three or four residents left to stay with family members, Bussey said, but interest in assisted living has recently picked back up.

“We have been seeing, over the last few weeks, an increase in calls consistent with what they were last year,” Bussey said. “We seem to be getting back on track. I think families are accepting that this is going to be the norm for now.”

The Summit at Brighton, Jewish Senior Life’s independent living community, had a slight decline in occupancy over the summer but is now 100 percent full with a wait list of nearly 50 people, Bussey said.

Skilled nursing residents have not left because of the level of care they require, according to Aydelotte.

“Skilled nursing facilities all over are seeing lower applications, though,” she said. “I think people are just trying to hunker down and stay home.”

Staff are helping residents make video calls with their families to help ease the restrictions on visitors, and at the independent living level, residents are looking out for one another.

“Because they aren’t seeing their families as often, they are each other’s families now,” Bussey said. “They’re really looking out for people who are more frail to make sure all their needs are met.”

CFC clients, about 70 percent of whom live alone, have reported feeling more isolated than usual.

“People were just really lonely and sad and wanted to talk longer than normal,” McDermott said. “We’re calling people at least twice a month. We doubled our efforts to have contact with people. Our mental health specialist has been super busy.”

Mary Rose McBride, vice president of marketing and communications at Lifespan, reported that families are increasingly looking to take their loved ones out of congregate living situations.

“They are worried about loved ones, and they are upset at not being able to visit,” she said. “Frustrations are high among families.”

McBride said Lifespan has asked the New York State Department of Health to allow an “essential support person” to be included in current visitation guidelines for long-term care facilities, particularly for residents nearing the end of their lives.

McDermott’s staff at Catholic Family Center has reported that their clients are currently viewing nursing home placement, even for rehabilitation purposes, as a last resort due to visitor restrictions and the increased risk of infection. Some who previously considered moving to higher levels of care are now leaning toward remaining at home, while others have found they are unable to get the assistance they need to age in place due to aide shortages. Some caregivers, she said, have also reported wanting to bring loved ones home from congregate living due to outbreaks, with a few taking on increased responsibilities of care to keep them at home.

Despite the challenges of the pandemic, Albright said aging in place remains a viable option for seniors and families.

“People want to make their house safe and they want to stay there as long as they can,” he said.

Amanda Renko is a Rochester-area freelance writer.