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Completing the circle of care: Alternative housing at Hope Meadows

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GHDC WHITE PAPER

Completing the Circle of Care: Alternative Housing at Hope Meadows

MANY OF THE SENIORS who have contributed to the Hope Meadows community for over a decade are finding it increasingly difficult to “age in place” as their health and mobility decline. This paper examines the case for providing an alternative housing arrangement for some of these seniors, so that while they may not be able to age in place, they will still be able to “age in community,” *i.e.*, remain living at Hope Meadows, continuing to sustain, and be sustained by, meaningful relationships until the end of life.

Background

In 1994 the nonprofit organization Generations of Hope launched Hope Meadows – a planned, geographically contiguous, intergenerational neighborhood for adoptive families and older adults. The purpose of this neighborhood is to promote permanency, community, and supportive relationships for families adopting children from foster care while offering purposeful engagement in the daily lives of older adults. It does this in a variety of ways, but the main strategy is to facilitate and support naturally emergent alliances, relationships and lifetime commitments across generational lines. Over time, the approximately fifty seniors who live in the neighborhood become surrogate grandparents to the children, mentors to the adoptive parents, and colleagues to one another.



Figure 1 A Hope senior and children at play outside the Intergenerational Center (IGC) at Hope Meadows. *Photo: Alex Harris*

As Hope Meadows has evolved and senior residents have aged, there has been a growing awareness of the need for alternative housing arrangements that would allow them to remain in the Hope community despite increased physical limitations and vulnerabilities. Aging in community at Hope Meadows is

essential for the well-being of everyone who lives there, especially for the seniors themselves (for more information on the concept of aging in community see Thomas, 2004; www.aicnetwork.org). Two decades of research has shown that social isolation increases the risk of sickness or death (Goleman, 1995). Conversely, social connectedness and

community involvement are two of the most powerful determinants of our well-being. For older adults, the more they stay connected and involved, the better their overall health (Butrica & Schaner, 2005; Goleman, 1995; Mark & Waldman, 2002; Putnam, 2000; Rowe & Kahn, 1998; Vaillant, 2002).

The challenge: Sustaining relationships

The housing structures at Hope Meadows are split-level single-family dwellings. These units are adequate for seniors who are able to navigate stairs and autonomously go about basic tasks of daily living such as meal preparation, house cleaning, and attending to medical needs and personal hygiene. For many, however, these tasks can become increasingly difficult over time, and the split-level design of the apartments exacerbates these challenges. Ongoing care and support from community members helps, but is not always enough to ensure the continued safety and well-being of these seniors. Decreased mobility also can reduce opportunities for interactions with other community members at a time when the need for social support is greatest. Over the past twelve years, several seniors have required assistance such that they have had to move out of the Hope Meadows neighborhood, away from their primary social network, and into an assisted-care or nursing home facility.

Such moves strike at the very heart of the Hope Meadows mission—to be an intergenerational community where a network of mutually supportive caring relationships becomes the first line of “intervention” in times of crisis or need, and provides a fundamental context for positive growth and development. Although seniors engage in many activities, their most valuable contributions reside not primarily in what they do as volunteers, but in the caring relationships they develop with the children and other adults. These relationships are essential to the health and well-being of all community members.

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High levels of participation, trust, and reciprocity are key attributes of individual and community relationships that produce socially desirable outcomes (Putnam, 2000). Issues of trust and reciprocity provide particularly salient reasons to support the development of an on-site senior housing alternative. Seniors who become physically and emotionally invested in Hope Meadows must be assured that their own worth is not measured simply by the sum of their volunteer hours; they must trust that community members will similarly care for them when the need arises. Social reciprocity requires that care and contributions to members’ well-being flow in both directions. Here, there is a stark difference between the paid care given in a nursing home and the indigenous care given by a loved-one. In the second scenario the giving is grounded in intrinsic and symmetrical relationships; it is not contingent on remuneration.

In a community like Hope Meadows, time and care are not commodities meted out in allotted quantities with the expectation of receiving exact recompense in the future, nor are they formalized or contracted. Individuals in a community rich in trust and an ethic of reciprocity are more likely to give generously and freely with the assumption that, should the tables be turned, they would be treated in a similar manner (Putnam, 2000, p. 134). These communities are generally healthier and more satisfying for all members. The Hope community relies upon an abundant supply of this social capital to “work its magic” and fulfill its mission.

Beyond reciprocity

There is another facet of “reciprocity” that presents an even more compelling reason to provide the kind of on-site housing that would permit seniors to continue to reside at Hope Meadows. There are obvious financial, safety and security benefits that draw seniors into relationships with other community members, in addition to more intangible benefits like love, affection and companionship. Most of these important goods may be found to a certain degree in outside housing facilities and nursing homes. There is, however, a critical element that is difficult to find in these institutional settings – the sense that one is useful, needed, important – the feeling that one continues to matter in the lives of others, and the belief that despite one’s physical passing, a meaningful legacy will live on in the lives of others.

The “need to be needed” is well grounded in social science research. Erik Erikson identified two crucial tasks of psychosocial development that emerge in late adulthood: guiding the next generation (generativity vs. stagnation); and living out one’s final years with a sense of integrity (integrity vs. despair) (Erikson, 1950, pp. 231-233). Both of these underscore the value of remaining engaged in meaningful relationships and activities that matter to oneself and others. Similarly, in a recently expanded version of Maslow’s “hierarchy of needs”, the need to “help others to self-actualize” ranks the highest (Maslow, 1968, 1999, pp. 133-134). Maslow observed that while lower-order needs, such as physical well-being and safety, reach a state of homeostasis and become less salient once they have been adequately met, the higher-order “growth needs” cannot be satiated, but actually become stronger once they are engaged (Maslow, 1968, 1999, pp. 27-49). Seniors at Hope Meadows who have engaged their higher-order needs for meaning and personal fulfillment through their work in the community face the likelihood of having most of that stripped away when they are forced to leave the community.

William Thomas (2004) lists “loneliness, helplessness, and boredom” as the “three plagues” of old age, arguing that institutionalized long-term care for seniors “...violates the deepest human need to balance the giving and receiving of care. People are trapped in a situation in which they receive far more care than they give. This imbalance inevitably leads to helplessness” (p. 180). The relationship between physical well-being and the ability to reciprocate in a meaningful way – to be needed by other community members – has been repeatedly echoed by Hope seniors like Jim Saunders: “Hope is a place for seniors to feel like they belong and can be productive in giving something back to the community... people here feel needed.” Seniors are the backbone of the Hope Meadows community, and their continued presence, even in the last days of life, needs to be assured if at all possible. For this to happen, alternative housing must be a priority.

Initial concept

The first requests for alternative housing came from the seniors themselves, as did most of the ideas for how to design it. The earliest concept was for a single structure with four bedrooms and a common kitchen, but this quickly evolved into a proposal for four (or six) fairly self-contained efficiency units with private baths and small kitchenettes.

Several streams of thought began to converge as focus groups were convened over several months, and an attempt was made to accommodate a variety of goals and interests which, as it turns out, actually exist in some tension with one another. One of the most basic motivations was simply to downsize from the existing 1,650 sq. ft. units to a more manageable apartment size, and to share meal preparation and housekeeping tasks. It was also clear, however, that several seniors were already both receiving and providing increased levels of practical support (e.g. providing meals during periods of recovery from surgeries, etc.) and could also benefit from a shared living space, especially if it were designed to accommodate their needs. Figure 2 (upper right) shows an early sketch of such a structure, drawn by one of the Hope seniors most likely to actually live there. Based on this and on other focus group conversations, another sketch was prepared to visualize the specifications and components that were being proposed for the individual units (Figure 3). Here a striking new feature appears – the living area and bedroom are designed to open up into a more-or-less continuous space, so that seniors who are confined to their beds for extended periods can still host gatherings of family and friends within their own apartments.

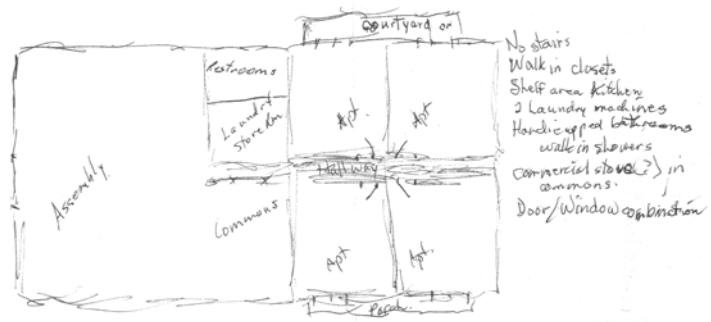


Figure 2. Some early design ideas for alternative senior housing at Hope Meadows, sketched out by a Hope senior. Among the requests: “no stairs”, “walk-in closets”, “walk-in showers”, and a “commercial stove” in the commons area. Each apartment would have its own patio, and laundry facilities would be shared.



Figure 3. An early attempt to represent some of the emerging specifications for the apartment units. Note the double pocket doors connecting the bedroom with the living area, the small kitchenette with sink and microwave, and the “roll-in” shower.

Another stream of thought entered the picture just as attention turned to the question of where to locate the new building within the neighborhood. Clearly it should be located as close as possible to the geographic heart of the neighborhood and readily accessible to the already-existing Intergenerational Center (IGC), perhaps even connected somehow. But it also had been clear for some time that the capacity of the IGC to accommodate large gatherings was severely limited and needed augmenting –

either by expansion (which would be architecturally problematic) or through construction of a larger assembly space or community center.

The resolution was to combine the two objectives, with a new community hall built into the basement of the alternative housing structure, and by locating the combined structure in some currently empty green space equidistant from the IGC and the Hope Meadows Office. Figure 4 shows the location of the new structure, flanked by parking areas and connected by a proposed new pathway (dashed line) to the IGC (upper right of figure). New courtyards would be created and would be designed to invite semi-cloistered activities that residents could join simply by walking or wheeling out across their patios and into the courtyards. Conversely they could be visited by passing children just as easily, particularly if a bicycle path were to be routed through the courtyards.

The task of articulating these various requirements into a coherent design and implementation is quite challenging. Generations of Hope has retained the services of Mackenzie Architects of Burlington, Vermont, who specialize in innovative housing for aging adults. Figure 5 shows the results of our most recent collaborative thinking, but the design is still evolving as we continue to incorporate input from seniors.



Figure 4. Preliminary study for location of the new senior housing structure, as sketched by Mackenzie Architects of Burlington VT. The proposed new structure is at the bottom of the image, between parking areas.

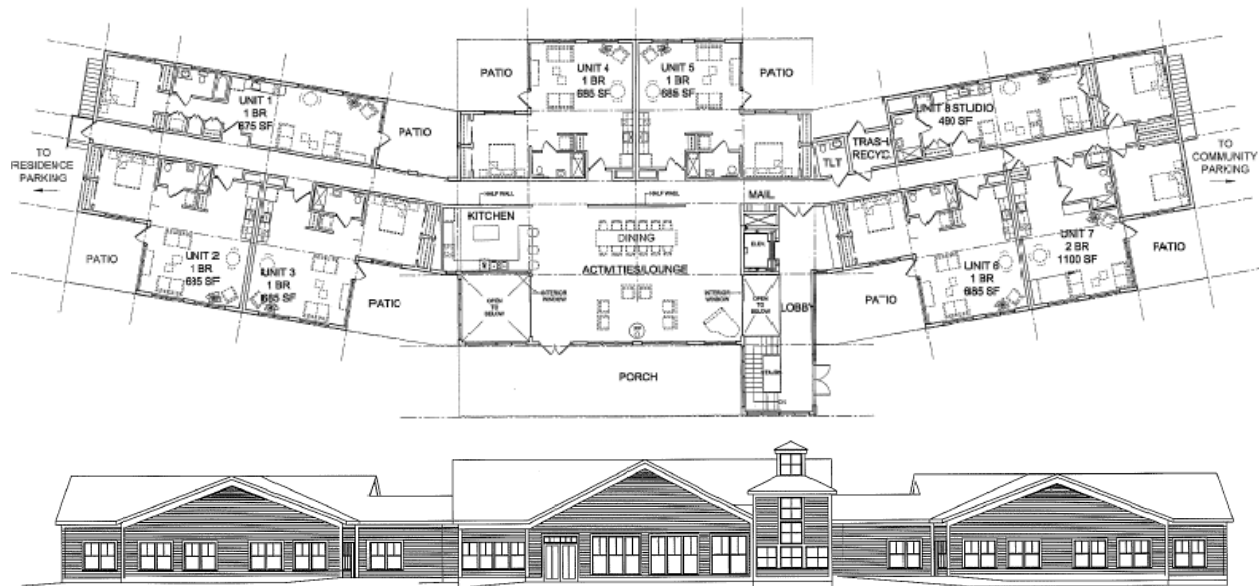


Figure 5. Proposed floor plan and elevation of the new senior housing structure. Common dining facilities are located in the center. Access to the community space below is by elevator and stairway, with some of the lower level open to the common space on the first floor.

The circle of care

Every senior at Hope Meadows will insist that “we are here to help the kids.” Few fully realize, however, that as they age and become less able to engage in their usual activities, they continue to provide an important benefit: they offer the children an opportunity to “give back” some of what they have received and feel useful and important in the life of another being. Again, a look at Maslow’s hierarchy of needs explains why this is the case, for it suggests that people who are struggling to get lower-order needs met (food, shelter, security, stability and affection) are not in a good position to address higher-order needs that require the ability to care for others (Maslow, 1968, 1999, pp. 53-67). Children who have been neglected and abused, as is the case for many who have come to Hope Meadows, often find it difficult to get beyond their own fears about having their basic needs met.

Caring for seniors presents a unique learning opportunity for children – one of profound importance. Learning to respond to others with caring forms the basic building blocks of moral development – a goal shared by families, communities, and nations (Noddings, 2002). In short, the continued presence of seniors at Hope Meadows provides children ongoing opportunities to engage in the kind of reciprocity so important to moral development. Interdependence, the capacity to enjoy mutual support and caring in relationships, is a key developmental task that can be conceived of as a circle of caring and contribution to the well-being of others. At Hope Meadows the links in this circle are children, parents, and seniors.

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When a senior leaves Hope Meadows due to the lack of safe and appropriate housing, a vital link in the circle of care is broken and children are denied opportunities to learn about compassion, reciprocity and interdependence; to feel that they matter to others; and to continue to develop their moral capacity. To the contrary, failing to meet seniors' housing needs teaches children that some community members are expendable, and that they are obliged to care for others only when it is easy to do so. At Hope Meadows, where the community is the main intervention, tearing the social fabric compromises its effectiveness and ability to fulfill its mission. With the creation of a senior housing alternative (a "Hope House"), important relationships will be sustainable even through the final stages of life, keeping the circle of care unbroken.

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