



Senior Living -- News of Interest

Examining the Green House Project senior living concept

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by [Carla Fenswick & Lillian Gilmer](#)

It's a fact of life that none of us likes to think about: As long as we live, we grow older. More Americans are living longer, but the downside of longevity is that more of us will spend more of our time dealing with the infirmities of age. We all want every phase of our lives, and the lives of our loved ones, to be as independent as possible, but the fact is that most seniors will need some sort of help during the last years of their lives.

Unfortunately, the thought of going even to a well-operated and caring nursing home strikes fear into the hearts of many seniors and the people who love them. Adding to this anxiety are the well-publicized reports of elder abuse and neglect emerging from some facilities. Providing needed help to our seniors without sacrificing their comfort and dignity is the goal of a new movement in senior care called "The Green House Project."

The Green House Project turns the traditional idea of a nursing home upside down. A Green House is almost indistinguishable from any other house in the community and is home to seven to 10 seniors, who live and eat together much as a family does with the help of a separate clinical support team. The Green House Project is the brain child of Dr. William Thomas, a geriatrician from upstate New York, who grew dissatisfied with the health and happiness of seniors living even in the best traditional nursing homes.

The first group of operating Green Houses opened in 2003 in Tupelo, Miss., by Methodist Senior Services of Mississippi. Since then, six more MSSM Tupelo Green Houses have opened.

A \$10 million grant made by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation in 2005 is dedicated to building and opening more of these facilities nationwide. According to the Green House Project Web site, there are 19 such projects in 12 states in the planning stages or under construction.

A two-year study conducted by the University of Minnesota from 2003 to 2005 found that Green House residents had a high satisfaction level, no back injuries caused by transfers of residents, less depression, and less need for anti-psychotic medication.

Family members and staff also report satisfaction with the Green Houses, which has resulted in fewer complaints at the state level and a staff turnover rate of less than 10 percent - remarkably low in the senior care industry.



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Building any skilled nursing facility for seniors, especially in the present hot real estate market such as Nashville, is a pricey proposition. However, the cost of building Green Houses falls somewhere between traditional institutional construction costs and residential construction costs, says Ellen Bartoldus, a project manager for the Green House Project. Thus, the per-person cost of building one is no more expensive than the per-person cost of building a new traditional nursing home facility. Also, once a Green House is up and running, the operating cost compares favorably, particularly in light of the improved quality of life. In fact, according to the Green House Project Web site, the only category of spending for a senior living facility that increases is direct care staffing.

An Aug. 1, 2005 article in Newsweek reported that the monthly price to stay in a Tupelo Green House at the time was \$4,350 when the average monthly bill for a traditional nursing home was more than \$5,000. Since the Tupelo Green Houses are licensed as nursing homes, Medicaid can cover the costs for residents who otherwise qualify for Medicaid. If a Green House didn't provide skilled nursing care, but acted more as an assisted living facility, a resident would not be able to have Medicaid pay the bill.

It's also interesting to consider the University of Minnesota study's finding that Green House residents tend to need less medication. In these times of rapidly escalating prices for prescription drugs, senior living companies considering a move to the Green House model will probably find this an attractive selling point.

Overall, the evidence thus far indicates that the Green House model provides a pleasant home-like environment in which our elders can receive the medical and nursing care they need without sacrificing independence, comfort and privacy. Once the expensive construction is complete, costs of operating a Green House seem to be at least comparable to a traditional nursing home.

The NCB Development Corp., which received the Green House grant through Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, says it "hopes to establish at least one Green House in every state" within the next five years in an effort "to propel the Green House into the mainstream of long-term care."

Chances are that most people reading this article have wondered how they will provide for either their own needs as seniors or those of parents or grandparents in the not-too-distant future. You might want to think "Green." For more information about the Green House Project, go to www.thegreenhouseproject.org.

Carla Fenswick is a partner in Waller Lansden Dortch & Davis' real estate practice. Lillian Gilmer is an associate at the firm. www.wallerlaw.com



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