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Case Study of Senior Cohousing Development in a Rural Community

Abstract

Senior cohousing, a type of cohousing that focuses on adults age 55 or older, is recent information to Extension educators. The study reported here examined the development of senior cohousing in a rural community. The programming stage of the development of a rural senior cohousing located in a town in the Midwest was observed for the study. The six components of senior cohousing: Participatory Process; Deliberate Neighborhood Design; Extensive Common Facilities; Complete Resident Management; Non-Hierarchical Structure; and Separate Income Sources (Durrett, 2009) were observed. Introducing senior cohousing to Extension educators may help them to present housing options for older adults.

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Introduction

Aging in place in their current home has become a quest for many older adults. However, it is not necessarily a viable option for those who cannot afford to maintain or retrofit their home to meet accessibility needs due to limited mobility. Therefore, "as the number of older adults continues to increase, finding housing opportunities that offer affordable, comfortable, and high-quality living will pose a challenge to families and community developers," (Nolan & Blaine, 2001). Housing types such as assisted living, nursing homes, or continuing care retirement communities are available to older adults.

A more recent option for older adults is senior cohousing, a type of cohousing that specifically focuses on adults age 55 or older accommodating varying levels of physical abilities and financial status (Cohousing Association of the U.S., 2010). Senior cohousing offers community support not found in other types of rural senior housing as residents care for and assist each other by sharing individual strengths (The Cohousing Company, 2009). The objective of senior cohousing is to create a strong sense of community by creating living arrangements that promote physical, social, and emotional well-being, thereby avoiding loneliness and isolation. Quality of life and emotional well-being are enhanced when residents feel secure and comfortable in their surroundings (Durrett, 2009).

For a built environment that enhances the daily life of older adults in senior cohousing, it is important to understand the characteristics of senior cohousing. The need for senior cohousing in rural area is continuously growing because 70 % of all seniors in the U.S. live in rural communities (Granberry, 2009). However, Extension educators may not be aware of this recent option for older adults. The purpose of the study reported here was to examine the development of senior cohousing in a rural community in order to help increase awareness of this type of housing option for older adults.

Senior Cohousing

The concept of cohousing originally began in Denmark in the 1960s, creating individual living communities designed to accommodate multi-generational families living together in collectively managed neighborhoods (Bamford, 2005; Nusbaum, 2010). Cohousing communities are organized and established by the residents who will live within them, through their participation in the overall design and continuous management of the neighborhood (Cohousing Association of the U.S., 2008b). The idea of cohousing reached the United States in the mid-1980s through architects Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett after they returned from studying the concept in Denmark (Cohousing Association of the U.S., 2008b).

Though these communities were originally meant to accommodate a variety of individual households, older adults in the U.S. have begun to take notice of the capabilities they may offer for an alternative option for housing. Many older adults in rural areas have minimal opportunities to partake in social interaction and activities that interest them, because they are frequently overlooked and often too far away from urban areas that may offer opportunities for social interaction (Roberson & Merriam, 2005; St. John, Blanford, & Strain, 2006). According to Chen (2001), older adults don't respond easily to a change in location, which can often lead to feelings of loneliness. This loneliness can be lessened through social interaction with neighbors and friends. For these reasons, it may be essential that older adults, especially those living in rural communities, are presented with housing options that can offer them the chance for social engagement and community interaction.

Senior cohousing is based on the idea that older adults are looking for an option for housing that applies directly to their needs and the way in which they want to continue living life (Abraham, Delagrange, & Ragland, 2006; Abraham-Paiss, 2005; Durrett, 2009; Elder Cohousing, 2005). Many older adults and baby boomers are looking for an option that offers a supportive home and lifestyle that will allow them to age in place in a community of their choosing, because it may offer significant benefits to their self-esteem, health, and wellbeing (Abraham, Delagrange, & Ragland, 2006; Peace, Holland, & Kellaher, 2011). Senior cohousing communities may allow older adults to live independently together because they are able to support one another by helping each other out with shopping, cooking, or taking care of one another during minor illnesses (Fromm & de Jong, 2009).

Senior cohousing communities are designed much like that of regular cohousing, though to meet needs of older adult residents, the physical design of the homes and common buildings may be addressed to where accessibility and ease of use are key elements (Silverberg, 2010). These communities are designed for residents to age in place through such designs that will allow for easy

wheelchair access, ensuring that older adults of all levels of physical ability are not hindered (Abraham, Delagrang, & Ragland, 2006).

Individual homes in senior cohousing communities are often downsized in space to allow for easy maintenance by residents, but also to allow more room for other buildings and outdoor areas included in the site plan (Bamford, 2005; El Nasser, 2009; Oswald, Jopp, Rott, & Wahl, 2010). The design of the common house is significant in that it may be used by multiple community residents on a daily basis as it serves as a hub for activities, providing them with social engagement and developing community relations (Fromm & de Jong, 2009). The common house may often include a kitchen, dining and living spaces, office space, and extra bedrooms for guests or even home health care agents if needed. These and other options depending on what the community decides (Abraham, Delagrang, & Ragland, 2006; Abrahms, 2011; Durrett, 2009; El Nasser, 2009).

Senior cohousing communities follow the typical design of regular cohousing communities and are based on six components: Participatory Process; Deliberate Neighborhood Design; Extensive Common Facilities; Complete Resident Management; Non-Hierarchical Structure; and Separate Income Sources (Durrett, 2009). These components distinguish cohousing and senior cohousing communities from those of other multiple-household facilities (Nusbaum, 2010).

Participatory Process

Participatory Process involves the direct contribution of future residents as they plan the design of their community with an architect or developer (Nusbaum, 2010). Durrett (2009) notes that this may begin by a core group of individuals working together to create a program, discover the site where the community will be built, hire the architect, and also market their community to gain additional members. Without the residents' direct input into the organization and construction of the community from the very beginning, the community will not be considered a cohousing community (Cohousing Association of the U.S., 2008a).

Deliberate Neighborhood Design

Deliberate Neighborhood Design involves the way the entire site is planned and organized to ensure community involvement (Cohousing Association of the U.S., 2008a; Nusbaum, 2010). Clustering individual homes together and placing them around the common house promotes social engagement and feelings of security because members are able to see activities at the common house and develop relationships with neighbors (Durrett, 2009).

Extensive Common Facilities

Extensive Common Facilities in senior cohousing communities almost always include a central common house, though there may be other facilities involved as well, depending on the residents' needs (Durrett, 2009). These facilities are there to supplement the smaller individual homes, providing spaces for residents to gather or pass through each day, developing the essential component of community (Cohousing Association of the U.S., 2008a; Nusbaum, 2010).

Complete Resident Management

In terms of Complete Resident Management, the residents of senior cohousing communities are in complete control of managing the neighborhood. They make all decisions together at community meetings. These meetings may consist of dealing with problems that arise within the community, the organization of community events, and maintenance of community facilities or site plan might require (Durrett, 2009).

Non-Hierarchical Structure

The Non-Hierarchical Structure of senior cohousing communities is there to elicit the understanding that no single individual or group has any authority over the community (Cohousing Association of the U.S., 2008a). Though there may be leaders in the planning of the community early in the beginning or individuals who head various committees according to their skills or interests, the community always makes decisions as a whole and through consensus (Durrett, 2009).

Separate Income Sources

Residents have separate income sources. Senior cohousing communities do not have a shared source of income for residents, though they may occasionally pay a member for a specific task (Cohousing Association of the U.S., 2008a). Instead, residents use their own private incomes and contribute time and work to the community in some form or another (Durrett, 2009). Through these six components, senior cohousing communities may afford older adults a viable and preferred housing option.

Procedure

The programming stage of the development of a rural senior cohousing community located in a town in the Midwest was observed for the study. It is this region's first senior cohousing community. Though this rural community is the first type of community of its kind in this region, there are other senior cohousing communities already completed within the United States, and more communities making quick progress. The senior cohousing community consists of residential units and a common facility designed to promote interaction between and among residents.

Participant observation where the observer becomes the part of the events being studied in formal and informal settings was conducted over a 6-month period. The potential residents went through the series of workshops that included Getting it Built Workshop in 2009 and Site Planning Workshop, Common House Workshop, and Private House Workshop in 2010. The data were analyzed based on the six essential components of senior cohousing by Durrett (2009): Participatory Process; Deliberate Neighborhood Design; Extensive Common Facilities; Complete Resident Management; Non-Hierarchical Structure; and Separate Income Sources.

Findings and Discussion

The study reported here examined the development of senior cohousing in a rural community, in part to provide information to Extension educators. The Participatory Process was observed as residents

actively participated in all levels of the decision-making process, which are made by consensus. However, reaching consensus on certain issues was time consuming, because not everyone shared the same opinions. Deliberate Neighborhood Design was addressed as the site plan was developed to include inward-facing residential entrances in close proximity to the common house and easily accessible to the common grounds. In terms of Extensive Common Facilities, a community house and common grounds that all residents can easily access from their residential unit were planned for the senior cohousing community. The common house was planned to accommodate groups. This will be accomplished through a large kitchen area as well as a large multi-purpose gathering room. Complete Resident Management began with the planning of the senior cohousing community and will continue through the daily management of the community. Although Non-Hierarchical Structure is a component of senior cohousing, leadership positions among residents were observed. The last component, Separate Income Sources, was observed because there is no community income generation.

As previously mentioned, senior cohousing can provide older adults with an alternative to institutional living. Though this type of housing option is not currently well known, training courses and fact sheets offered through Extension programs can provide information to rural communities regarding the benefits of senior cohousing for older adults who are considering moving. It is a way for active older adults to have a say in not only where they live, but also how they live. By participating in the participatory process as set out by Durrett, older adults can be involved in the decision-making processes that affect their everyday lives. Senior cohousing allows residents to attend to their physical, social and emotional well-being, and, as opposed to institutional living, it also allows them to contribute to their built environment.

Living in a rural community can be isolating for older adults who have limited access and/or mobility or whose families have moved away. Participation in senior cohousing in a rural area can enable older adults to become a part of a community that they otherwise might not have an opportunity in which to participate. This grants them the ability to potentially live independently together.

According to Nolan and Blaine (2001), finding functional housing options in rural areas can be a particular problem for older adults when making housing decisions. They also note that this lack of options poses a problem for the communities when the community is involved in planning and policy making. Although senior cohousing may not currently be available in many rural areas, introducing the concept and process of senior cohousing to those older adults living in rural areas may plant the idea and inspire some aspiring people to come together to develop senior cohousing in their community. Extension educators can develop education modules or fact sheets related to senior cohousing to present the senior cohousing in rural community. The important point is to ensure that these older adults, particularly those living in rural areas, are informed about senior cohousing.

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