

## House mates

### Program matches elderly with live-in aides

By REBECCA WALDMAN  
STAFF WRITER

It was a match made in ... Oakland County.

Nilda, 63, needed help around the house, from big things like cooking and cleaning to small things like buttoning her clothes properly. Her two children, who checked on her daily, started to worry about her living alone when she fell down her basement steps, breaking her ankle.

Mary Ann, 36, needed a place to live and a livelihood.

The two women met three months ago through a program that matches people who need companionship in their homes, called "home providers," with people who need affordable housing, or "home seekers."

"It solved a lot of problems for me and solved a lot of problems for their family," said Mary Ann. "It's working out well."

The program is called Homeshare, and it has been matching Oakland County residents who need each other for 16 years.

Homeshare, a project of Oakland Livingston Human Service Agency sponsored by the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments, has been especially effective.

**'About 99 percent of our providers are elderly. Some tell me, 'I'm just so frightened at night to be alone.'**

Bea Wallace  
Program coordinator

tive with senior citizens who need help, but who don't want to move into a nursing home. Some need only to share household expenses like food, rent, and utilities. Others require around-the-clock care.

"About 99 percent of our providers are elderly," said program coordinator Bea Wallace. "Some tell me, 'I'm just so frightened at night to be alone.'"

Monthly, Wallace gets about 60 applications, meets about 10 potential pairs, and places about two. The process is time-consuming, taking up to three hours per application just to read.

"It's like a marriage," Wallace notes. "I have to sit and talk with people, get a feeling of people. Homeshare is meeting needs, and that can be very emotional."

The needs are sometimes so painful that Wallace has had to take a break several times over the past five years she's been a coordinator. "You really don't realize how many people are in

need," she said.

About 90 percent of seekers are women, mostly in their 40s or 50s, who were laid off from jobs or are escaping abusive relationships. About 80 percent of providers are also women, or couples with one spouse too ill for the other to care for alone. In all matches, at least one participant must be at least 55 years old.

Wallace and her partner, Shirley Sherman, screen all applicants carefully for substance abuse and health. References and medical reports are a must for both seekers and providers. "We are really looking for good, competent seekers," Wallace said.

The program's original purpose was to match people who needed to share space, costs, and chores. Wallace estimates now that only about 5 percent of Homeshare participants fall into this category.

ry. Twenty percent of the matches are elderly people who simply want someone with a daytime job to keep them company at night.

But the vast majority of home seekers, around 75 percent, move in and give constant care as a full-time job. Wallace is careful that neither side takes advantage of the arrangement. When providers claim that they can't afford to give more than room and food in exchange for service, she investigates their finances and negotiates for monetary compensation. "The days of slavery are over," she tells them.

Wallace expects commitment from seekers, too. "We really like people to stay a good couple of years," Wallace said. "Some that I placed five years ago are still there."

The reasons for their commitment are not simply economic. "People do get attached to each other," Wallace said. "It's a blessing."

Homeshare is looking for home seekers and home providers. For more information, call OLHSA at 958-5132.

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