



## Better aging with (social) chemistry

ERIN ANDERSEN

The Globe and Mail

Published Friday, Jun. 01 2012, 6:23 PM EDT

Last updated Friday, Jun. 01 2012, 7:06 PM EDT

When they move in together this summer, the residents of Wolf Willow plan to share cars and weekly dinners. They will walk to the theatre together and to the farmers market on Saturday morning and, perhaps, start their own yoga class in the courtyard. If someone falls and breaks a hip, there's a guest room for a caregiver, and a shower that fits a wheelchair. They will bring meals to each other during illness, and collect mail when anyone's away. In the evenings, there will be jam sessions in the music room.

The 36 soon-to-be residents of this Saskatoon residence range in age from the mid-50s to 80, and none of them wanted to go to a retirement home where strangers would live next door and a for-profit company would make the rules. They certainly wanted to avoid a nursing home for as long as possible. So they designed and built their own place to age; this August, Wolf Willow will become the first senior co-housing development in Canada.

"Many of us have come through looking after our parents. For many, that meant nursing homes and wrenching demands on all sides," says Margo Day, 64, who with her husband, Ken Wiggins, 61, will leave their acreage outside Saskatoon for Wolf Willow in a couple months. "We hope that our senior years might be a little more graceful."

In co-housing arrangements, residents have private apartments and share communal space and resources. The movement began in Denmark in the 1960s, and today Canada has about a dozen family-oriented co-housing locations. But as baby boomers begin to worry about the loneliness and limitations of old age, the burdens they may place on their adult children and even their own ecological footprints, senior co-housing has begun cropping up across Europe and North America. In addition to Wolf Willow, projects are under way in the Sooke community on Vancouver Island, as well as in Chilliwack and Smithers, B.C.

The numbers revealed this week from the 2011 census emphasized how quickly Canada is going grey and how many more Canadian will live into extreme old age. More than a quarter of seniors – and nearly half of all Canadian women over the age of 65 – live on their own, which research has consistently linked to a higher risk of health problems, particularly falls that lead to lengthy hospital stays or expensive home care.

Research has shown that most elderly Canadians could live independently for longer with just a little help – getting groceries, for instance, or a daily check-in, the kind of assistance that an overwhelmed home-care system and faraway adult children often struggle to provide.

"Everyone wants to age in place," says Margaret Critchlow, professor emerita at York University who studies communal living and will be part of the senior co-housing project in Sooke. Ultimately, she says, the draw is building community into her retirement plans. "Think how much people devote to their finances. What if we put a similar amount of effort into developing our social portfolios?"

"We have a lot of seniors who are increasingly cast adrift and warehoused," says Charles Durrett, a California architect who has helped to spearhead the North American co-housing trend and recently published *The Senior Co-Housing Handbook*. He cites Danish research that has shown that seniors in co-housing eat better and are more active and socially connected – factors that can help them live independently for eight to 12 years longer than their more isolated and sedentary peers.

"If the government ever wanted to do something to save themselves billions of dollars," Mr. Durrett says, "they would help catalyze new projects. Unfortunately, they aren't that forward-looking." Governments do boost co-housing initiatives in Denmark and Sweden.

Co-housing projects are specifically designed to construct an instant neighbourhood. The Wolf Willow complex is shaped like a horseshoe, to create “casual contact” between residences, Mr. Wiggins explains. The 21 accessible and green-friendly private residences open into an airy courtyard; the shared laundry room is beside the communal kitchen so that people can meet serendipitously for coffee. (Unlike in most retirement homes, residents are permitted up to two pets, and there are guest rooms for visiting family members.) The residents will already know each other well – they have worked together for four years to design the project.

Wolf Willow is located within walking distance of parks and downtown and will cost about \$7.4-million to build, but the costs of the units will vary from \$275,000 to \$475,000, and some may be rentals. Compare this with the cost of retirement living, which, according to the Canada Mortgage Housing Corp., averages \$26,000 a year but is often much higher (and there’s no place to sell at the end).

Clearly, however, co-housing’s allure depends on the individual. “You have to like the idea,” Dr. Critchlow says. “It’s not a commune or an institution. You share resources, but you also have your privacy. But it’s not a turnkey condominium where you don’t have anything to do with your neighbours.”

For Eileen MacKenzie, this was precisely the appeal. She recently sold her home in Saskatoon because she was spending too much time on upkeep when she would rather be playing tennis. At 77, she will be one of the oldest residents at Wolf Willow. “I just like the idea of growing old with a bunch of people I really like.”

*Erin Anderssen is a Globe and Mail feature writer.*