

## HAPPILY ON THEIR OWN

# Increased resources allow elderly to live on their own

Increased resources allow elderly to avoid nursing homes and live in their residences longer, census data show

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More local senior citizens are living on their own instead of in nursing homes, thanks to increased resources to help them stay independent.



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Franklin County has the highest percentage statewide of people 65 or older who live at home — either alone, with a spouse or with their children — new data from the 2010 census show.

Miriam Blessing, 85, moved into her present home after her husband's death five years ago and started using LifeCare Alliance services.

About 59 percent of the county's 115,700 seniors fall into one of those categories.

Just 3.2 percent of seniors, 3,754 people, in Franklin County live in nursing homes. About 5 percent lived in nursing homes in 2000.

"Over the last two decades or so, there has been a shift in the whole system," said Robert Applebaum, director of the Scripps Gerontology Center at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. "We're recognizing that even people with severe disabilities might be able to live at home."

Nursing homes can provide 24-hour medical care for those who need it, but advocates said the increased quality of life and financial savings that can accompany living at home are often an advantage.

Several local nonprofit groups are helping by providing in-home medical care, prepared meals, cleaning services and other resources.

In addition, Franklin County residents have voted every five years since 1992 to fund a property-tax levy, which generated \$26 million for senior services in 2010. The PASSPORT program, which is funded through state and federal governments, also arranges home care for seniors on Medicaid in each county.

"There are more options now," said Steve Mould, spokesman for the Ohio Health Care Association, a trade organization for nursing homes.

He said Ohio's moratorium on new nursing home beds, which began with Medicaid budget cuts in 1996, also has led many nursing homes to offer

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short-term rehabilitative care that allows people to live at home long-term.

Despite the drop-off, Mould said, "We know there is still going to be a need for skilled nursing."

The shift away from nursing homes also is visible statewide.

Ohio's senior population increased by more than 114,000 people in the past decade, but the percentage living in nursing homes has dropped from 5.6 percent to 4.1 percent.

"Nursing homes have their place," said Chuck Gehring, executive director of Columbus nonprofit LifeCare Alliance. "But there's this whole middle crowd that can go either way. We're trying to keep them in their homes as long as possible."

LifeCare Alliance provides free meals, cleaning services, medical consultations and nutrition advice to 15,000 seniors in central Ohio. The group also provides fans for those without air conditioning and food for clients' pets.

After her husband's death in 2005, Miriam Blessing decided it was time to downsize but didn't want to give up living in a home of her own.

Now 85, Blessing has some trouble walking, but she's living in a new home on the North Side with help from LifeCare, which provides her with frozen meals and home-cleaning services. She lives with her son and her cat, and the crews that bring her meals also help keep her company.

Barring any serious health complications, she sees no reason to leave.

"Everyone wants to live in their own home," she said. Financially, "it's more reasonable, and it's just better all the way around."

AARP, which works on behalf of people 50 and older, reports that the yearly cost for a private nursing home is about \$60,000.

In-home services for the PASSPORT program cost the county an average of about \$1,000 per month for each client — about one-fifth of the cost of a nursing home, said Antonia Carroll, director of the Franklin County Office on Aging.

She said other programs can be more expensive.

"We serve people who are very poor and don't pay anything for their services," Carroll said, "all the way up to the very wealthy, who pay for 100 percent of their services."

But looming increases in the population of older Ohioans could strain service providers.

Miami's Scripps Gerontology Center predicts that Ohio's senior population will increase by 25 percent by 2020 and nearly double by 2040. Add budget cuts to the mix, and programs could be threatened, Gehring said.

"We've been running deficits for a couple years now," he said. "We've chosen not to turn people away. But with rising food costs, there ain't no way."

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