

Seniors on the Move

Moving across the country is challenging, but when it includes frail, elderly parents, it becomes exponentially harder. It's why those who have gone through the process with a loved one suggest getting an early start, having a handle on the to-dos, and planning ahead.

But most families wait until a crisis before considering housing options and purging a house, according to Judith Kahn of Judith Moves You, a New York City senior move manager. "It's not unusual for people to call me just weeks before a move," she says.

She says it's best to start sorting, cleaning, and figuring out the next steps a year prior to downsizing. "Frail seniors have physical and emotional limitations and can only work two or three hours at a time," she says. When a move manager swoops in with just weeks to do their work, it increases seniors' stress, particularly if they have dementia.

You're fired

Still, parents and children resist. "Part of it is coming to terms with the idea that hiring me is staring mortality in the face," Kahn says. Sisters Rachel Wineberg-Kaufman of Hastings-on-Hudson, N.Y., and Johanna Kellman of Naples, FL, came face-to-face with such resistance when trying to get their 90-something parents, Bernice and Julius, to downsize several years prior to their eventual 2018 relocation from Chicago to Naples.

The two had raised the topic several times, but their parents refused to consider moving or even having help in their house. "My mom kept firing the aides we hired," recalls Wineberg-Kaufman.

Recognizing the signs

But the signs that it was time for a change were there.

When the daughters visited, friends pulled them aside and told them that their parents really could use more help. They noticed piles of unopened mail and disorganization in their parents' normally tidy condo.

But getting their parents to accept that it was time to downsize wasn't easy, and the sisters wanted to respect their parents' wishes.

Then, when Wineberg-Kaufman's husband talked with his in-laws and suggested moving, they jumped on it (See more of the story in the SRES blog), opting to live near Kellman in Naples. A semi-neutral person, someone other than the children, making such requests sometimes can be persuasive and effective.

Tip: When talking with parents about medical directives, ask about their wishes for long-term living arrangements, should aging at home become impossible. Wineberg-Kaufman says, "I wish I had asked, 'How will I know that you're ready to move? What signs should I watch out for?'"

Preview options in advance

After getting a thumbs-up from their parents, Kellman scrambled and started visiting and researching the independent housing options. Kellman suggests doing some scouting years before a move. The choices are vast, confusing, and expensive.

In addition, it's important to pick a place where your parents will feel comfortable. What is the building's vibe? Do residents seem engaged and happy? Do the activities match your parents' interests? Could you picture your parents living there?

"You really just have to find the personality that's right for them," says Kellman.

Once Kellman, an interior designer, chose an apartment in an independent living building, she took measurements and planned a layout. House-sized coffee tables, couches, and so forth, typically are too big for the limited space in independent living apartments. But moving some furniture makes the space feel homier and less institutional.

That advance planning and measuring guided the sisters' decisions about to bring. They opted for a few pieces of furniture that were important to their parents, some quilts her mom had made, photos, and some books and mementos.

Managing the nitty-gritty

"If you don't have a sister who's an interior designer, hire somebody experienced in senior moves," advises Wineberg-Kaufman.

Such managers are expert in dealing with the big issues of a move and the nitty-gritty details, including packing and shipping, turning utilities on and off, and transferring insurance.

Their unique skills also entail scanning a room and knowing what can be donated, what's saleable, and what need to be tossed.

Moreover, notes Kahn, they have pre-vetted connections with every type of service provider – movers, geriatric care managers, auctioneers, estate sale managers, and so forth – needed to execute a move seamlessly.

When their dad moved from independent to assisted living in the same facility after their mom's death in 2019, the sisters marveled at senior move managers' tricks of the trade.

For example, they photographed the medicine cabinet and drawers before packing so that everything was put in the exact same spot in the new apartment. Their dad didn't have to hunt around for things, which minimized his stress.

Orchestrating farewells

A few weeks before the move, the sisters got in touch with their parents' friends and asked that someone go out with them for a meal each day. It was one way for their parents to enjoy their last weeks in Chicago, celebrate with friends, and bid farewell to their hometown.

And to diminish their parents' angst, the sisters purged and packed *after* the actual move. They left the apartment intact so that their parents' last view of it was one of beauty, not chaos.

Finding new friends

In retrospect, Wineberg-Kaufman realized that another reason for parents to move to a senior building sooner rather than later is how challenging it is to make new friends, something her parents found difficult.

Wineberg-Kaufman notes that people in that age group may have hearing and memory problems and sometimes they're too frail now to fully engage socially. She also observed that sometimes interactions among residents can mirror those of young children who play *next* to one another but not together.

Had their parents moved they were younger, Wineberg-Kaufman thinks they would've been able to build a stronger social network. Now that Bernice has passed away, Julius is isolated at his assisted living facility. But when he was back in Chicago for his wife's memorial service, he reconnected with old, lifelong friends and was sharp and engaged. "Because of that depth of friendship, they all just fell into conversation," recalls Wineberg-Kaufman.

The entire experience has caused her to consider a new model for aging. "Set up your own assisted living with friends," she says. "Buy two condos: one for the friends and one for the caretaker."

Resources:

If you're planning a cross-country move with a senior, here's a list of resources and checklists to get you started.

- AARP: <https://bit.ly/2Ryjn4b>
- Caring.com: <https://bit.ly/2RxTfGy>
- Family Caregiver Alliance: <https://bit.ly/3aoM5gh>
- National Association of Senior Move Managers: <https://bit.ly/2NKH7c>

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