

## Homesharing History in the US

Homesharing is not common today in the US but past generations of Americans have a history of sharing housing. At turn of the century an estimated 15% of Americans lived with non-relatives. It was common for early immigrants to open their homes to related and non-related adults. In 1930's census figures indicate that 10% of all families had unrelated "lodgers" as the depression encouraged people to double up and also find ways of generating income.

The # of non related people sharing in the US dropped significantly after WWII because of the boom in construction and easy financing. The nuclear family became fully rooted in tradition with each family treasuring their own home, yard and privacy. At the same time corporations started moving employees around the country and we started cutting the ties with extended families.

Attempts to organize or formalize homesharing resulted in about a dozen homesharing agencies across the US by early 1980's. National Shared Housing Resource Center—formed in 1980 by Maggie Kuhn, then head of the Gray Panthers, with a \$4,000 grant from the Presbyterian church the goal to coordinate programs, and lobby on their behalf.

**Maggie Kuhn** founded the Gray Panthers in 1970 as a response to her forced retirement at age 65. She led a remarkable life, integrating people of all ages in working for social and economic justice. The Gray Panthers was created to work on issues of concern to the both old and young, such as pension rights, age discrimination, and affordable housing. At the core of the Gray Panthers' message was that older people needed to seize control of their lives and be in the active world working for issues in which they believed. Kuhn's candor, charisma and lively approach to the needs and problems of the old drew major media attention around the world.

Maggie became a homesharer after her parents died and she had to care for her mentally ill brother. She said that getting her first two original homesharers changed her life. She continued to share her home until she died. After learning first hand of the benefits of homesharing and seeing many elders living alone, Maggie founded another organization, the National Shared Housing Resource Center (NSHRC). In 1981, she and her housemates designated a portion of their home as NSHRC offices and, before long, the Center was fielding more than 3,500 inquiries annually.

Kuhn fought off efforts by everyone from politicians to the managers of nursing homes to treat the elderly like amusing children, instead insisting on a place at the table and a voice in decision-making that affected the lives of the old. Maggie's advice to activists interested in creating social change shows the strength of her convictions: "Leave safety behind. Put your body on the line. Stand before the people you fear and speak your mind - even if your voice shakes. When you least expect it, someone may actually listen to what you have to say. Well-aimed slingshots can topple giants. And do your homework."

Maggie Kuhn, who continued to play a role in the Gray Panthers and in Shared Housing

until her death at age 89, is considered by many to have started nothing less than a contemporary cultural revolution, both in terms of redefining the meanings of age and housing, and through her insistence on "young and old together." She was directly instrumental in significant changes in local, regional, and national policy including nursing home reform, housing definition and zoning, ending forced retirement provisions, and combating fraud against the elderly in health care.

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Homesharing programs developed around the country independently, targeting different populations.

From different data we know that in:

1983-there were 106 both shared & homesharing programs

1986-there were 169 distinct homesharing programs only

1994-there were over 400 programs (both homesharing and shared residences)

In 2011, in US-109 of both homesharing and shared housing (only 65 match-up homesharing programs) so we are back to 1983 levels. The reality is that programs in the US are few and far between. In the US, programs are mostly located in cities, mostly on the east or west coasts, and mostly established as housing programs for a variety of populations including homeless, the disabled and the elderly.

In 15 years from the height of the movement, # programs around the country have decreased by almost 75%. How did we get here?

Lack of standardized program meant no replicable model developed; no nationwide program took it on; lack of concerted marketing; no universal funding source; very different in different places and focus on different types of clients.

Neither fish nor fowl-is it housing or is it service?

In the US, nationally strong focus on development -money for buildings- not for services.

Elder issues placed on the back burner.

Shared housing means too many things-transitional housing for homeless, battered women, etc.

**Concept of social exchange**-bartering- the needs of both parties must be met-if needs of either party too great-not likely to be matched

Works best with people who are

- Flexible
- Have realistic expectations
- Can communicate well

Central to satisfaction-is the amount of social interaction they have

## **Current HomeShare programs in the US**

Based on 2011 NSHRC membership survey -64 match-up programs: 18 responded

. Below is a summary of the results:

- 62% of respondents were homesharing programs within a larger agency, 38% were independent homesharing programs
- Staff sizes ranged from 1-5 employees, majority paid, but quite a few volunteers and part-time staff contributing
- Average annual budget: \$200,000
- Budget breakdown:
  - o 46.5%: Public/government funding
  - o 16.6%: Private foundations
  - o 15.7%: Private benefactors
  - o 7.1%: Donations
  - o 10.9%: Fees for Service
  - o 3.1%: Other
- 66% reported a fairly consistent funding pattern, 33% less consistent, largely due to shifts in government funding
- Only one organization receives a grant (HUD) to help subsidize rent for the first 90 days
- 2/3 charge fees (home provider, home seeker and match fees)
- 94% check client references themselves
- 72% help with lease development
- 100% assist in conflict resolution
- 50% require a medical reference check
- 28%: Surplus of home providers; 61%: surplus of home seekers; 11%: good balance
  - o Biggest challenges: challenging home provider expectations and home seekers who cannot afford rents
- Average number of matches last year: 71. 30% of those were service exchanges
- 44% tracking trend data
- Church mailings, want ads, and local community affairs are the biggest advertising/outreach sources, followed by college, hospital, and community association outreach

## SUMMARY: Homesharing Programs in the US in 2011

By Kirby Dunn, HomeShare Vermont

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