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When Home Is a Community

The face of senior living is changing. How can families benefit from the shift to human-centered communities?

By Jim Biggs, Kate Abate,
and Allison Dykens





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Most family members don't arrive at senior living with a checklist; instead, they arrive with knots in their stomachs. A fall. A missed medication. A spouse who can't manage alone anymore. Or, the quiet realization that the home they love no longer fits the life they're living.

In those raw moments, the real question isn't just *"What level of care do we need?"* It's *"How do we stay safe without losing who we are?"*

For too long, senior living in the United States was built around fear—designed as a last resort and focused on managing decline rather than sustaining joy. Historically, senior housing emerged from charitable and faith-based institutions intended to shelter older adults without family or financial support. Residents often surrendered assets in exchange for lifelong care, reflecting a system built for protection rather than preference.

Even after Medicare and Medicaid professionalized care in 1965, many communities remained institutional, organized around liability, staffing ratios, and clinical efficiency rather than the rhythms of real life.

Progress has been made. The shift from nursing homes to hospitality-inspired communities has helped humanize environments that once felt clinical. Warmer design, better food, and more attractive settings matter. But beauty alone does not solve the deeper challenges families face: loneliness, loss of purpose, workforce burnout, uneven access, and long-term sustainability.

The next evolution of senior living is not optional. It is essential.

A Longevity Society Requires New Infrastructure

Today's older adults are entering senior living later, with higher acuity, stronger preferences, and more choices. Industry conversations often frame this shift

as "needs versus wants," but that framing misses the deeper transformation underway.

Economist Andrew Scott describes this moment as the rise of a *longevity society*—one where success is measured not only by lifespan, but by healthspan. Meeting this moment requires more than upgraded amenities or incremental programming. It requires infrastructure that integrates housing, healthcare, community, and belonging into daily life.

Across the globe, a new generation of community-based living models is emerging. These approaches are designed upstream—proactively supporting well-being, connection, and identity rather than reacting to decline.

Models That Integrate Life, Not Just Care

UNIVERSITY RETIREMENT COMMUNITIES

University retirement communities (URCs) offer one of the clearest examples of integrated living. Nearly 100 URCs now operate across the United States, positioning residents as lifelong learners rather than passive recipients of care.

At communities such as Mirabella at Arizona State University and Broadview at Purchase College (SUNY), residents audit courses, attend lectures and performances, use campus facilities, and mentor students. The result is sustained intellectual engagement, intergenerational connection, and renewed purpose.

DEMENTIA VILLAGES

Dementia villages challenge the assumption that safety requires confinement. At De Hogeweyk in the Netherlands, people living with dementia move freely through small neighborhoods with shops, cafés, gardens, and theaters.

Life is organized around familiar routines and shared lifestyles, supported by thoughtful environmental

design that reduces anxiety and supports autonomy rather than restricting movement.

SMALL-HOME NURSING MODELS

Small-home nursing models, such as the Green House Project, replace large institutional units with homes of 10–12 residents. Consistent staffing and relationship-based care enable early detection of health changes while preserving a sense of normal daily life.

WELLNESS-ORIENTED COMMUNITIES

Wellness-oriented communities extend integration across the lifespan. Serenbe, a master-planned community near Atlanta, embeds movement, social connection, and time outdoors into daily life through walkable design, biophilic principles, and access to nature.

Building on this foundation, Serenbe's aging-in-place campus (opening in 2026) will integrate housing, wellness, and medical services into a cohesive ecosystem.

AFFORDABLE INTERGENERATIONAL MODELS

Affordable intergenerational communities push integration even further. Models such as Bridge Meadows (Oregon) and Chicago's H.O.M.E. programs pair older adults with families in mutually supportive arrangements, exchanging housing for meaningful assistance and connection.

These communities address affordability, workforce challenges, and social isolation simultaneously—restoring interdependence rather than charity.

Designing With Residents, Not For Them

A defining shift in senior living is the move toward co-design. Progressive communities invite residents, families, and care partners into the creative process, recognizing older adults as experts in their own lives.

Co-design builds trust before move-in and fosters partnership instead of hierarchy. This philosophy is reinforced through resident councils, shared governance structures, and transparent decision-making around dining, programming, and social norms.

When older adults are positioned as collaborators rather than consumers, agency and autonomy remain central.

Empowering Care as an Operating Philosophy

Integrated communities require a parallel shift in care philosophy. Empowering care models replace rigid routines with flexibility, hospitality, and partnership.

Perceived control is a strong predictor of well-being in later life (Robinson & Lachman, 2017).

Institutional schedules that dictate wake-up times, meals, and activities undermine agency at a stage of life when it matters most.

In contrast, empowering models adapt to residents' energy, preferences, and rhythms. Consistent, relationship-based staffing allows trust to deepen and subtle changes in health or mood to be recognized earlier. Stable teams benefit residents while also reducing burnout and staff turnover.

Technology That Supports Dignity and Choice

When thoughtfully integrated, technology can enhance safety and independence without reinforcing a clinical atmosphere. Increasingly, user-friendly systems are replacing pull cords and global alarms with tools designed to preserve dignity, privacy, and choice.

Many of the most effective technologies operate passively, without requiring resident interaction. Lighting that adjusts automatically at night can reduce fall risk without disrupting rest. Sensor-based tools and AI-enabled platforms can detect changes in mobility, sleep, or daily routines, allowing communities to respond earlier and more proactively.

Used well, technology shifts care from reactive to anticipatory—supporting safety while maintaining autonomy.

EXAMPLE OF EMERGING TECHNOLOGY: PASSIVE HEALTH MONITORING

One example of emerging technology in senior living is passive health monitoring integrated into everyday environments. These systems use sensors and analytics to identify early changes in hydration, mobility, or other health indicators without requiring action from residents or staff.

Early pilot programs suggest that passive monitoring can support value-based care by enabling earlier interventions, reducing avoidable hospitalizations, and preserving dignity in highly private aspects of daily life. These tools are most effective when implemented transparently, with clear consent, privacy protections, and alignment with person-centered care goals.

The Human-Centered Business Case

Human-centered innovation is also an economic imperative. Communities that invest in dignity, purpose, and connection address one of the sector's most pressing challenges: workforce stability.

Reduced burnout and higher retention lower recruitment and training costs while strengthening relationships among staff, residents, and families.

Clinical outcomes improve as well. Person-centered

Guiding Families Toward the Right Community

models are associated with lower depression rates (Hermer et al., 2018) and reduced antipsychotic use in dementia care (Kim & Park, 2017). Proactive health technologies further reduce avoidable hospitalizations and emergency department visits.

These benefits translate into stronger market performance. Communities centered on connection, respect, and autonomy outperform traditional models on occupancy, retention, and satisfaction (Poey et al., 2017).

Beyond Surface Impressions

Choosing a senior living community requires looking past appearances to understand how care unfolds in unseen moments—after a fall, during a health change, or in everyday communication.

When communities respond with clear processes, real examples, and data rather than vague assurances, it signals that person-centered care is a daily discipline, not a slogan.

The evolution of senior living from institution to community reflects a broader shift in our social contract. By prioritizing co-design, relational care, and dignified technology, aging becomes not a problem to manage, but a shared human experience of possibility. •CSA

AI Disclosure: This article was edited with the assistance of AI tools to support clarity, structure, and flow. All ideas and content are original to the authors.



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Certified Senior Advisors play a critical role in helping families look beyond polished tours and staged lobbies. These five questions help reveal how a community truly functions day to day:

How does the community involve residents in decision-making?

Look for participatory governance, active resident councils, and clear feedback systems.

Which technologies support safety and communication?

Strong communities can explain how technology enables proactive care and how privacy, consent, and security are handled.

How does personalized care adapt over time?

Care plans should function as living documents that evolve with residents' needs, abilities, and preferences.

What spaces foster real connection?

Third places—cafés, gardens, libraries—should feel active, familiar, and resident-led.

How are families engaged as partners?

Look for proactive communication, clear points of contact, and a culture that welcomes transparency.