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Getting a chance at life outside a nursing home

Facility's residents live independently under constant watch.

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Charles Marriott, who is 73 and has emphysema, says he wound up in a nursing home after a drug problem got the better of the relative who was caring for him.

He hated the 15 months he spent there and gladly grabbed a chance to move into an apartment of his own.

So it doesn't bother him a bit that the place he's lived in since Jan. 14, NewCourtland Square in Germantown, uses machines to monitor practically every move he makes - all in the interest of making sure he's safe.



And it's the sort of setup that helps make achievable a goal of the state and federal governments: moving healthier people out of expensive nursing home care and into independent-living situations.

In Marriott's apartment, there are motion sensors on his walls. Other sensors know when he opens his refrigerator and his food cabinets, or when he goes to bed. They know when he leaves the apartment and when he comes back.

The sensors send data to a computer that has learned Marriott's routine. If he's more sedentary than usual or lingers too long in the bathroom, the computer tries to find out why. It makes a call, and if Marriott doesn't answer, it starts asking people to check on him.

The former car and insurance salesman thinks the intrusion is well worth the chance to live without roommates.

"This is like heaven to me," he said last week at his simply decorated apartment.

He marvels at the unobtrusive sensors - small, barely noticeable white plastic devices - that keep tabs on him. The system called for help one day when a new medication knocked Marriott into too deep a sleep.

"This is the most amazing thing I've ever seen," he said.

NewCourtland, a Philadelphia nonprofit group that provides housing and services for senior citizens, started moving people into NewCourtland Square in December. So far, it has seven residents in the 26-unit building, which previously housed an independent-living facility.

The company announced this month that it was selling five of its seven nursing homes to concentrate on projects more like this one.

For several years now, the state and federal governments have been pushing to move healthier people out of nursing homes, which cost an average of \$67,000 a year, said Jennifer Burnett, Pennsylvania's acting deputy secretary for the Office of Longterm Living.

NewCourtland's program, which is for low-income people only and includes more services than most nursing home packages, costs about \$57,000 a year. Most of that comes from Medicaid and Medicare. On average, residents pay \$218 of the \$781-per-month rent themselves.

NewCourtland Square residents participate in the LIFE (Living Independently for the Elderly) program, which provides all their medical care.

In the past, most people who went to a nursing home for just a few months would be stuck there. Often, they would have no home to return to. But since 2007, Pennsylvania has moved 4,000 people into more independent housing.

Three other organizations in the Philadelphia area operate LIFE programs, but Burnett said NewCourtland was making the greatest use of monitoring technology, which is growing in importance.

"We are going to have limitations in the amount of direct-care workers that are available, and I think technology's going to have to pick up," Burnett said.

Using the equipment is a balancing act, though. The motion sensors will not notice if someone looks wan or weak.

"The last thing we want to do is set up a high-tech home where the person never sees anybody and gets very isolated," Burnett said.

Residents at NewCourtland Square have a meeting room where they can get together. They go to the NewCourtland LIFE center's day program for activities and to have medical conditions checked.

David and Grace Mutch, who arrived in December, have already decorated their living room with an impressive number of art projects done at the center.

They lived at 21st and Tioga for 23 years, but faced the choice of living on the street or in a nursing home when their apartment building was condemned. They grudgingly chose the nursing home, but David Mutch, who is paralyzed from the waist down, was pleased when employees agreed the couple did not belong there.

He has stuffed their new freezer with food and is thrilled to cook their meals. "I was glad to get out and be on my own again," he said.

The couple adopted a playful kitten, who is fascinated by the pull-cord alarms in the bedroom and bathroom. That created some false alerts for the monitoring system, so the Mutches put the cords out of Missy's reach.

Kim Brooks, NewCourtland's vice president of housing and community services, said people adapt surprisingly quickly to nursing home life and need "reconditioning" before they move out.

That has proved harder than the staff originally thought: People come to expect that someone will feed them and get them their pills.

"We quickly realized that we need to do a lot more back in the nursing home," she said.

One man, who had dementia and was wandering, has had to return to his nursing home, but 17 people are currently training to live on their own.

NewCourtland is so sold on the idea of remote monitoring that it has started a for-profit arm to provide the equipment, most of which is made by a Minnesota company called Healthsense, to other organizations.

Some LIFE members in the community have more machinery than Marriott or the Mutchers - there also is equipment that can transmit weight and blood-pressure readings to health professionals and tell whether people are taking their medicines on time or using the toilet.

Brian Bischoff, president of Healthsense, said the company offered 12 kinds of sensors, all of which connect to a WiFi network. They can be used not only to keep frail people safe, but also to make sure senior-housing employees check on patients as often as they are supposed to.

The company's equipment is in use at 50 sites, he said, mostly on the East Coast and in the Midwest. It charges \$1,350 for the equipment and \$89 for monitoring.

The technology first was developed to keep an eye on older people in rural areas.

"We quickly learned it wasn't just a rural problem. It was everywhere," Bischoff said. Many elderly people said they could go up to three days without hearing from anyone else.

The system sent help to a NewCourtland community resident who fell in her bathtub, Brooks said, and helped a daughter sleep easier as her mother, who had Alzheimer's disease, roamed the top floor of their house. The computer was set to call the daughter if her mother strayed downstairs.

It isn't perfect, Brooks said. "It's been known to send alerts when people decided to watch a couple of movies in a row or slept late on a weekend. Most people don't mind that."

Marriott among them. "I feel safe that way," he said