

## HOUSING AND THE ELDERLY

**W**hen Pruitt-Igoe, St. Louis' prominent public housing development, was deliberately demolished little more than a decade after winning a national award for architectural excellence, the housing industry was forced to face unpleasant facts; not the least, that in housing, "people" problems require solutions as well as "brick and mortar" problems.

The economic plight of the elderly tenant and his need for costly services pose a problem that our society is just beginning to recognize.

There is need for increased public awareness, which could lead to governmental programs by which public, private, and philanthropic strengths could be brought to bear effectively.

At that point, the role of the professional housing manager dealing with the elderly becomes crucial.

In housing for the elderly, physical questions are important – no one minimizes the need for safety-engineered bathrooms, 36-inch wide door-bucks to permit wheelchairs rather than the customary 24-inch width, waist-high electrical outlets to reduce bending, ramps in addition to awkward steps, electric-eye doors, non-skid floors, appropriate illumination and internal communication systems. But the most difficult lessons we have to learn are those that deal with people.

In 1900, those over 65 constituted some 4% of the nation's population; by 1940, the percentage reached 6.8%; today the 23 million men and women over 65 make up over 10% of the nation and, significantly, 16% of the voting age population. Every day 3,000 persons over 65 die, while 4000 enter the age group, for a total increase in the

aged population of nearly 400,000 per annum. And, if physical quarters appropriate for this group are in short supply, housing managers with necessary skills and knowledge are even scarcer.

We are going to need all the help we can get from many different sources in the social welfare network, particularly from psychologists and social workers.

We are going to have to learn to understand these specialists, even though they speak a jargon that seems designed to confuse the layman. For example, social workers never 'tell' each other anything; they 'share' even if it is the news that you have just been fired. They don't 'do' things, but have 'modalities of service.' In the professional literature one finds phrases like 'activity-proximity' or 'cathectic flexibility'; real estate people must learn to understand the code. Picture, for example, the busy building superintendent who complains about a long-winded tenant and is told about the 'therapeutic value of reminiscence.'

The building manager must develop a sensitivity to the special needs of the elderly.

First of all, we must explore our own attitudes, our hopes and fears, denials and aversions, because in our actions we express our feelings in 101 different ways without meaning to; the elderly are all too aware that in this youth-worshipping, goal-oriented society they are considered "left-over" and "unnecessary."

Next, the housing industry must learn that the aged comprise several overlapping subgroups: the strong or feeble, alert or senile, poor or well-to-do, barely literate or well-educated. In competence, the aged range across a broad scale in their ability to function effectively on their own and to meet their own needs. The most dependent, of course, are the physically disabled and mentally impaired; those should really be referred to case-work agencies. The other extreme are those essentially able to perform well with complete independence. (The latter are known in social work jargon by the unfortunate phrase "intact aged.")

But all the aging tend to suffer some progressive loss of hearing, eyesight, or reflex speed. All, in varying degrees, can become momen-

tarily confused or frightened or forgetful. So elevator doors must close more slowly for them; signs must have larger print, and directions should be expressed more simply and clearly and loudly and repeated often. Forms to be filled out should have larger blanks and boxes, because the elderly sometimes have trouble holding a pen or writing. Elevators need floor indicators so the passenger can get to the door before the car arrives; wind gusts which can knock down the frail or make a door difficult to open must be anticipated in building design. Extra handrails for bathtubs and showers, mailboxes and kitchen cabinets at convenient heights, gentle ramps and flush door-saddles designed with wheelchairs in mind – must become standard.

Just as the housing planner for the elderly must think in terms of easy access to adequate means of transportation, possible home-chore assistance, perhaps community living rooms and kitchens, and almost certainly, minor nursing care and round-the-clock emergency services, so the building manager must learn which social or psychological problems building staff should deal with and which are beyond their competence, and need specialists.

The National Jewish Welfare Board, of which I have been President for the past four years, has recently determined, for example, that while even regular social workers are not good predictors of which elderly are subject to bouts of psychological depression (about 30%), a brief, self-administered questionnaire called the Zung Self-Rating Depression Scale does the job accurately and can save everyone concerned much time and anguish.

Building staff need help in distinguishing between difficult or problem behavior that can be considered normal and that which is genuinely pathological.

The building management organization dealing with the elderly should learn to deal with calls for more handyman service, heavy cleaning help, housekeeping aid, and with personal services including some form of telephone reassurance; and (where economically feasible), it must learn to plan for concierge desks, security guards, and information and referral services.

Since even young and healthy bachelors sometimes have trouble with shopping, meal preparation, housecleaning, laundry, clothesmending, and so forth, it is not surprising that the elderly do (and are grateful if they get it).

The other side of the coin, however, is that building staff need protection from “the clinger,” who can’t do anything unless you help him; or “the big boss,” who must have the last word at all times on all subjects; or the “loner,” who withdraws and can’t be reached; or “the sitter,” who just won’t budge; or “the manipulator,” who always has an angle, a counterproposal, or what he is sure is a “special situation”; “the Lothario” or “Great Lover,” who needs to demonstrate audibly and sometimes visibly that he is still interested in sex; and, finally, from “the trouble-maker,” who undoubtedly was a first-class pain-in-the-neck when young and has now become worse.

Everyone involved with the elderly in any capacity should be reminded of the requirements that all human beings share throughout the life-cycle: the need to love and be loved, the need for a sense of identity and belonging.

Even with a tendency to fall into a role of dependency and passivity and a reluctance to accept responsibility, the elderly have a legitimate and continuing need for advisors, consultants, and confidants. As individuals whose earning years are behind them, they are usually on tight budgets and need help in getting the greatest possible value for their expenditures on housing, food, and medical care, and on transportation, without which an older person tends to feel isolated and depression-prone.

We must understand the elderly as individuals who, in retirement, leave not only the world of meaningful work, but also the social contacts that the workaday world represents; who feel themselves slipping out of the organized life of the community into a situation they often see as uselessness and dependence.

At the period in life when they are least able to cope, the elderly find themselves subject to psychological stresses (crushing at any age) such as the death of a spouse or close relative, severe illness or personal

injury, dramatic change in financial status, or complete change of physical surroundings and neighborhood contacts.

Their problems are profound and it would be wrong to imply that the housing industry has the responsibility, let alone the means, skills or resources, to meet them adequately.

But as our society becomes increasingly aware of the problems and moves to deal with them, the housing industry should play its part.

True, we have our share of venal types for whom the dollars involved are not the chief consideration but the only consideration; we have our share of practitioners who think of real estate management in terms of supplying fuel oil and janitorial service, period; and we have our share of those who, having turned the subsidized building rehabilitation program into the expensive and wasteful farce it is becoming, are now eyeing with anticipation the governmental dollars beginning to flow for housing for the elderly.

But there are those, too, who are trying to convert the trade of building management into a profession; who set reasonable standards and try to meet them; who try to combine economic feasibility with social responsibility, integrity and compassion. These are the individuals who, in the words of the Bible, "with all their getting, get understanding."

If we can attract them to the field of housing for the elderly, if we can train them properly, equip them with the necessary legislative and economic tools, and compensate them appropriately, we will have discharged our responsibility to the aged who, for the moment, are "they" but who, before long, will be "we."

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