

Communities offer a variety of services for aging adults



Choices in senior living



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Lorien Health Service's Bel Air location recently unveiled a state-of-the-art therapy space that includes a BMW i3 that seniors can practice getting themselves and their belongings in and out of.



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A couple is shown in their Homstead residence at Springwell Senior Living in the Mt. Washington neighborhood of Baltimore.

BY BRIAN ENGLAR

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For many seniors, living independently is no longer an option. At the same time, they might be capable of doing enough things for themselves for which a traditional nursing home and its clinical, full-time care environment isn't the best fit either.

This dynamic has led to the explosion of the assisted living industry. Older Americans have an ever-increasing array of choices that allow them to maintain a more independent lifestyle, similar to the one they would have at home, while still getting help when they need it.

"Senior living options are becoming more popular because as the population ages, more people are looking for ways to make their lives easier," said Phil Golden, director and principal of Springwell Senior Living in the Mt. Washington neighborhood of Baltimore. "Living on your own can get difficult as you get older — it's not as easy to clean your home, maintain a lawn, cook for yourself, make repairs, drive back and forth to run errands and social engagements. Nor is it easy for adult children to assist their parents in doing all those tasks."

According to the National Center for Assisted Living (NCAL), there are about 29,000 assisted living facilities throughout the country containing nearly a million licensed beds. In 2007, there were just over 11,000 such facilities, according to the journal Health Affairs.

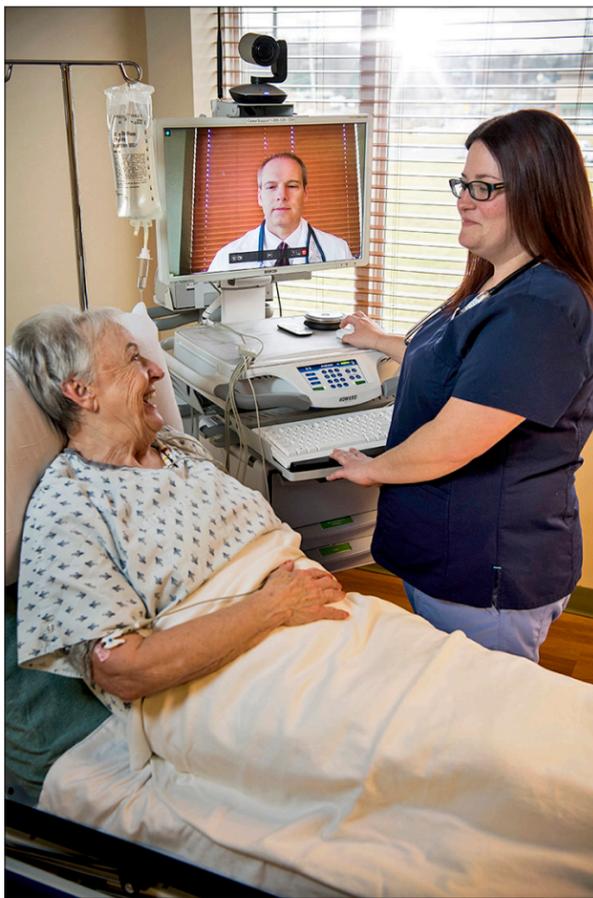
According to the Maryland state government website, there are 350 assisted living facilities in the state that contain 10 beds or more.

Ed Walter, administrator for the Bel Air location of Lorien Health Services, which operates nine assisted living facilities in Maryland, says this massive growth in the popularity of assisted living is largely a function of Americans maintaining better health at more advanced ages.

"Sixty is the new 80," Walter said. "Today, people are living longer and are in great shape. They want to continue with their quality of life, and assisted living is a solution."

Options in assisted living can run from the types of living arrangements to the level of care to the quality of the amenities.

"Assisted living is built on the philosophy of person-centered care, and the long term care experience is unique to each individual," said Rachel Reeves, spokeswoman for NCAL. "Some seniors may be fairly independent, so they and their family members may be focused on social activities,



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Lorien Health Service's Bel Air location was the first assisted living facility in Maryland to offer Telemedicine, in which a patient accompanied by a nurse can speak to and be seen by hospital staff remotely through a hub at the facility.

wellness programs, security and other services like house-keeping and transportation. Other seniors may be needing more care assistance because of health issues, so they and their loved ones are more focused on personal care services."

Golden said Springwell offers three primary options, independent living, assisted living and memory care, which caters to seniors with Alzheimer's, dementia and other types of memory problems.

"Offering varying levels of care is a trend we're seeing as more communities realize residents' needs change over time," Golden said. "Our assisted living services are meant for seniors who need a little more support. Each assisted living resident at Springwell receives a personalized care plan. They can remain as independent as possible with licensed caregiv-

ers at hand for those who need that support for some or all their day-to-day activities."

Walter and Golden identified several trends in assisted living. Walter said one of the most important is the move toward a more resident-focused environment that feels more welcoming and less like a hospital, and allows seniors to enjoy a high standard of living.

"Many people walk into our facilities and comment, 'This feels like a hotel, not a nursing home,'" Walter said. "That is because we take a patient-centric approach to amenities, offering movie theaters, libraries, computer stations, ice cream parlors and cafes, which build a sense of community."

The amenity at the front of many seniors' minds is food, Reeves said. As Americans have increasingly developed a taste for a variety of gourmet foods, senior living facilities like Springwell have been keeping up with the times and offering higher quality dining options.

"Residents enjoy gourmet food, which is another recent trend," Golden said.

Walter said therapy spaces are increasingly being designed to more closely mimic the home and daily life experiences. His facility recently unveiled a state-of-the-art therapy space that contains a BMW i3 that seniors can practice getting themselves and their belongings in and out of, as well as practice bathrooms and kitchens and simulation games.

Technology is also being used in other ways to improve care, Walter said. Lorien's Bel Air location was the first assisted living facility in Maryland to introduce Telemedicine, where a patient, accompanied by a nurse who has examined them, can speak to and be seen by hospital staff remotely at a hub at the facility.

"In addition to reducing hospital re-admissions by about a third, Telemedicine patients are seen more quickly and the physician has more information during the initial conversation, which improves the outcome for the patients," Walter said.

Lorien has also introduced Telehealth, a similar service for people living outside of one of its facilities.

With so many options available, Reeves recommends that seniors and their families work together to find the best fit.

"Ultimately, it's important for a prospective resident and their loved ones to sit down together and talk about what's important to them and what's financially feasible," Reeves said. "Prospective residents and families should then go tour a few different assisted living communities to meet the staff and residents, try out a meal and ask questions."