

## Sun City It's Not



Marcus Yam for The New York Times

The walking group of Bloomingdale Aging in Place doesn't let snow interfere with a constitutional in Central Park.

By [CONSTANCE ROSENBLUM](#)

When the co-op conversion wave began in [New York City](#) in the 1960s, singles and young married couples flocked to the Upper West Side hoping to get a piece of the action. Some of those people, now in their 70s, are still there, cemented in place by apartments bought for a song or equally treasured rent-stabilized units.

“The kids have left,” said Aaron Shmulewitz, whose law firm, Belkin Burden Wenig & Goldman, represents more than 250 of the city’s co-op and condo boards. “The dog has died. But these people stayed put.”

As the neighborhood’s population has grayed, some apartment houses have morphed into what social

scientists call NORCs — naturally occurring retirement communities. The most recent census estimates indicate that 22 percent of Upper West Siders, or 46,000 people, are 60 or older, compared with the citywide average of 17 percent. Attracted by convenient shopping, abundant mass transit and a wealth of cultural activities, many older residents hope to remain in their apartments the rest of their lives.

Most programs tailored to this population are found in public housing projects and buildings like Mitchell-Lama developments, where the government helps keep rents low. In many such complexes, so-called NORC programs financed with city and state money provide services including on-site social workers, escorts to medical appointments, and classes, lectures and workshops on issues of interest to the elderly.

Privately run buildings typically have a tougher time providing similar programs, in part because they lack the necessary financial resources. There is also a problem of perception. A young family might be wary of renting in a building where older residents attend chair yoga classes in the lobby, the same way empty nesters might avoid a co-op where the library has been transformed into a playroom.

Some boards struggle with the need to provide services to favor an aging population. Stories are told, for instance, about buildings that refuse to allow ramps or handrails in their exquisite Art Deco lobbies, even though a gleaming marble floor can be a slippery hazard to an older person negotiating a walker.

Steven Wagner, whose firm, Wagner Davis, represents co-op and condo boards, recalled a case in [Brooklyn](#) involving an older resident who had trouble navigating the steps to the basement laundry room. He presented the issue to the co-op and condo committee of the New York City Bar Association, and solutions included having the board pay to send out the resident's laundry. In the end, the co-op board agreed to install grab rails along the steps.

“We advise boards to try to be as sensitive as possible to people unable to care for themselves,” Mr. Shmulewitz said. “Because there but for the grace of God go us.”

Some buildings try hard to balance the needs of different populations, even on a tight budget.

Grassroots efforts to serve this exploding population — the first wave of baby boomers has already turned 65 — range from help buying groceries to informational programs on the complexities of [Medicare](#). And they win enthusiastic praise.

“These programs present challenges,” said [Fredda Vladeck](#), the director of the Aging in Place Initiative of the United Hospital Fund and creator of the city's first government-funded NORC program, at Penn South, an income-restricted co-op in Chelsea. “But there's no question that they can have a profound effect on the quality of life for older people, by helping them stay in their homes for as long as possible, as well as having a positive impact on the overall community. And that's a huge public benefit.”

One of the earliest examples of a privately run program was created at Lincoln Towers, a cluster of beige brick high-rises in the West 60s that is home to more than 9,000 people in 4,000 apartments. Built as a rent-stabilized complex in the 1960s, the buildings went co-op in 1987. [Project Open](#), which grew out of the Lincoln Towers tenants association, was born three years later. Janice Hohenstein, who moved into 170 West End Avenue on Aug. 1, 1965, the day it opened, and will be 92 come July, was one of the two founders.

Some 40 percent of Lincoln Towers' residents are over 60; some are in their 80s and 90s. Many are single and live in the starter units to which they moved decades ago. The group's Web site suggests the range and intensity of their concerns: “Who will help me in an emergency?” “I'm alone most of the time, my spouse, my friends are gone.” “My bills get more and more confusing and overwhelming.”

With the help of [JASA](#), a social services organization, Project Open tries to meet their needs, emotional as well as physical. One of the most popular events is the Wednesday-night class taught by a retired

classics professor, which has up to 50 people reading plays by Aeschylus. The monthly blood-pressure checks, equally well attended, are administered in Project Open's office, a cinder-block space outfitted with card tables and folding chairs.

One wintry Monday morning, the room filled quickly with men and women on walkers, in wheelchairs, or leaning on canes. There was Jean Grabowski, whose outfit this day included white sneakers and a jaunty red beret topped with a pompom; Lillian Goldberg, in a gray tweed blazer; and Mildred Gilman, who showed off a little card listing her previous readings, adding that her cardiologist was impressed by the numbers. Also present was Sylvia Savitt, who took a moment to compliment the volunteers who grocery-shop for her.

"They're good pickers," said Ms. Savitt, who is 88 and was outfitted this morning in a black velvet hat topped with flowers. "And they know that I want only kosher."

Working out of this office, a pair of social workers help residents obtain everything from food stamps to home health aides. On New Year's Eve, Project Open organizes a dinner for people who would otherwise be alone. Teenage volunteers help older residents master the mysteries of the laptop. Discussions on such issues as pain management and decluttering (a big issue in NORCs) attract 60 to 70 people at a time. The annual budget of about \$125,000, which helps pay for outside staffers, is raised largely through a fund-raiser, lobby requests for contributions, and bequests from residents.

Ms. Hohenstein is still deeply involved in the organization. She runs the advisory committee meetings, writes the Project Open newsletter, keeps in daily contact with the social workers and does the accounting for the annual fund-raisers.

Evelyn Rich, a resident who helped start a similar program at nearby Lincoln House and sat for a time on Project Open's advisory board, sees the population served by these efforts as a strength, not a liability. "My vision is that seniors aren't a burden but an opportunity," Ms. Rich said. "We want to share with the communities we live in. We want to keep out of nursing homes. We're retired, but we're not tired."

At Park West Village, a forest of brick towers in the West 90s, residents seeking help for such tasks as changing a light bulb and finding an escort to a doctor's appointment consult black-and-white loose-leaf binders — one in each of the seven buildings. The binders, created five years ago by the [Park West Community Network](#), a residents' group organized after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, are kept at the desk in the lobby and list scores of residents and specific tasks they can help with: picking up a prescription, preparing a meal, mending, reading aloud, making a run to the post office, and dozens more.

Though the information is intended as a resource for all [Park West Villagers](#), the elderly are particular beneficiaries. "Several years ago we did a floor-by-floor survey," said Winifred Armstrong, a longtime resident and a prime mover behind the effort. "There are 2,500 apartments, and we discovered that 20 percent of the residents were 65 and older. We were concerned about maintaining and developing a sense of community for this population."

Though the program is modest, and depends entirely on volunteers, the list of those helped, and those helping, has remained steady since its founding. When Jaclyn Silverman had a heart attack, her upstairs neighbor, Sondra Schiff, took her to the hospital and stayed with her. Kathie Horan compiled lists of stores and pharmacies that deliver. Dinnel Spencer fetched a fellow resident from the hospital after electroshock therapy.

Nonetheless, aiding this population presents challenges. "We had to press for ramps in two of the buildings, to allow wheelchair accessibility," Ms. Armstrong said. "There was a lot of dragging of feet. And with five different managements among the seven condo and rental buildings, it can be hard to

organize complexwide efforts.”

The century-old Belnord, a blocksize Renaissance Revival landmark on West 86th Street, is one of the grandes dames of Upper West Side apartment houses. Its jewel is a vast courtyard framed by soaring arched entrances. Come warm weather, the space is a tranquil oasis of tulips, azaleas and flowering trees, the soundtrack the water trickling from the marble fountain. Once horse-drawn carriages circled the courtyard; the writer [Isaac Bashevis Singer](#), a longtime resident, strolled its paths in search of literary inspiration.

Ted Comet, 88, who recalls Mr. Singer — “a feisty gnome of a man” — has lived in the Belnord for 45 years. Here he spent 13 years caring for his wife, Shoshana, who died last year of Alzheimer’s disease.

In 1994 the [Belnord](#) was bought by Extell, and in the years since, the population has become increasingly upscale. Although some tenants, like Mr. Comet, still occupy rent-stabilized units, others pay up to \$38,000 monthly for a five-plus-bedroom apartment.

In recent years the number of older residents has waned. The building has 217 rental apartments, and in 2000, it was estimated that as many as 60 percent of residents were at least 60. Now that estimate is down to about 20 percent.

To serve this population, efforts were made to provide services within the building. For a time after the Sept. 11 attacks, the social services agency [Dorot](#) was given use of a ground-floor community playroom one day a week, and a social worker from the agency offered services like meal delivery and referrals. Dorot, which had come to the building at the request of Thomas Vitullo-Martin and Sumner Rosen, leaders of the tenants’ organization, also held what it called “teas” in individual apartments to describe its offerings.

“But there were issues involving privacy and confidentiality,” said Sara Peller, Dorot’s associate executive director of programs. “We couldn’t say we were doing such-and-such for a person because many people didn’t want their neighbors to know they were getting help.”

After 18 months the effort was abandoned, and the ground-floor space is now used exclusively as a playroom, reflecting the growing number of families with small children.

Today, some in the dwindling group of elderly residents still receive help on an individual basis through Dorot, whose office is around the corner. But efforts to establish on-site services proved formidable, in part, some people who study the effectiveness of NORC programs suggest, because of issues of scale.

“When you have large numbers of older people in one complex, as you do in Lincoln Towers,” said Harry Schwartz, an urban planner, “it’s easier to provide services to help them.” Mr. Schwartz, who lives in New York and is an expert on such efforts, added, “With just a handful, it’s a much greater challenge.”

And the managers of private buildings are aware that the elderly are not the only ones they have to keep an eye on. At the Belnord, for example, stories are told about stoves left burning and bathtubs overflowing in the apartments of older residents. But, as Hedi Well, the leasing and property manager for Extell/Belnord, pointed out, “that can happen with younger families, too.”

### **A Village Within the City**

When the term NORC first appeared on the scene, it typically referred to an individual building whose population had aged over the years. But the term is increasingly being applied to clusters of buildings, or even entire neighborhoods — what social scientists call horizontal NORCS.

A textbook example of a horizontal NORC is the set of buildings served by [Bloomingdale Aging in Place](#), an organization that grew out of a pair of block associations. The buildings, which fall within a

jagged-edged area bounded by Broadway, Riverside Drive and West 102nd and 104th Streets, include both private brownstones and large co-ops like the Broadmoor and the Master.

The area encompasses 2,500 households, some of whose residents have lived there for half a century and many of whom live alone.

Bloomingdale Aging in Place, an all-volunteer effort, is financed through contributions and, currently, a modest grant from the Manhattan borough president's office, earmarked for yoga and tai chi classes. The program was started in June 2008 when 60 older people from the neighborhood showed up at a meeting to discuss what services could help meet their needs. "We wanted to help ourselves stay," said David Reich, 74, a retired researcher for I.B.M. and one of the group's founders. "For many people, the desire is simply to connect with other people and get neighborly help when needed."

Today, Bloomingdale Aging in Place involves 400 people. Some 70 volunteers help keep the organization and its programs going, including reaching out to those in need — escorting an older person to the bank, making a run to the supermarket. But the greater benefits are social and emotional.

"This population is concerned about isolation, about loneliness," Mr. Reich said. To that end, the organization sponsors two multigenerational book clubs, along with quiet and early dinners in the neighborhood and panel discussions on issues like pain management that draw up to 50 people. "When people meet each other in a friendly situation," he said, "they are more likely to accept help from those neighbors than they would from a stranger."

Eleanor Ledogar, 79, has lived on the Upper West Side on and off since 1965; she and her husband, Robert, 80, are both members of the Bloomingdale Aging in Place board. "We're feeling our way," Ms. Ledogar said of the program's offerings. "But we're glad to be a part of it because we don't ever want to leave the neighborhood. And we hope we don't have to."