Having a roommate means more income, less loneliness

By ELIZABETH KIEFER

Paul Covington purchased the cheery apartment on the second floor of a regal brownstone in Harlem in 1998. Six years after that, he got married, got a tenant for the apartment and moved out. Two years ago, after separating from his wife, he moved back in again.

Now 81, he had begun thinking about ways to supplement his income. Then his son saw a subway ad for a New York Foundation for Senior Citizens (NYFSC) Home Sharing Program, which matches seniors with roommates. Covington was curious and filed an online application with NYFSC.

Meanwhile, James English, 63, had been living on his own in Morris Park but was looking for a change. “People get older and they need a little more companionship,” he says.

English met Covington in person for the first time on a Wednesday morning in early July, chatting outside before ascending the stairs to see the apartment. The men became roommates almost five months ago, an arrangement they agree has been working out well.

“Similar interests and values are key, and that’s where the social work component comes in,” says Hoffman. “When a match occurs, we keep following up, and fortunately they seem to go well. But it’s all totally voluntary. They can call us anytime and we’ll be there to help.”

As the baby-boomer population continues to age in New York City and elsewhere, innovative solutions will be key for caregivers and seniors alike. Caroline Cicero, Ph.D., is the director of the University of Southern California’s Age Friendly University Initiative, and says that reaching elderly people to inform them is part of the challenge.

“We expect people to walk into a senior center and say, ‘I’m old. Please help me,’” Cicero says. “We need to find places that older people gather anyway and reach out to them. Cities and local communities need to really step up and help older people age in place.”

Covington, the supplemental income of a renter helps him stay on top of his mortgage, but the main benefit he sees is big picture.

“It used to be that social security, pension, and your assets were expected to get you through the older years and retirement,” says Katelyn Andrews, the director of public policy at LiveOn NY, an advocacy organization for the city’s seniors. “But now, especially in NYC, not a lot of people have equity in their house, so that leg of the three-legged stool is gone.”

Increasingly, savings — whether because of the 2008 financial crisis or lack of opportunities to have grown wealth over a lifetime — aren’t there.

“If all you’re left with is social security, it’s simply not going to be enough,” says Andrews. “So while you may never have lived in poverty previously, the cumulative disadvantages you might have experienced are going to add up into hardship eventually.”

But the setup is about so much more than the money. A cure for loneliness and isolation figures into the equation, as does the potential for connection.

“People need to feel secure,” she says, pointing to the example of a 93-year-old host who lives in a doorman building on the Upper East Side and currently rents a room to an NYU student. The student pays very little but, in exchange, is on-site to watch over the host, make sure he’s eaten breakfast and sometimes accompany him to medical appointments.

“These will target people who live alone or in single-family homes, and state-funded nonprofit will be the primary funder,” says Hoffman. “Those are the most critical, beyond price, ease of use and coverage,” she says.

Optimizing functionality is key, too. Anita Perr, a clinical professor of occupational therapy at NYU, recommends pre-programming numbers, enlarging the font size, increasing screen contrast and tailoring ringtones and auditory alerts.

“Lower tones are easier for people to hear — and make sure they know how to use the volume,” she says.

Bottom line: “The more we can keep people connected to the world, the richer their lives are,” says Perr.

— Elizabeth Kiefer