

## Enjoying the good life at senior homes

By Jane Adler

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It's definitely not your grandfather's old folks' home. Many of today's senior living communities are on the cutting edge of design, technology and social networking trends, according to a new study.

Seniors and their families can expect to find retirement buildings and campuses loaded with amenities, services and activities all meant to keep residents healthier longer.

The trend at retirement buildings is to "change residents' lives in a positive way," said Linda Hollinger-Smith, study author and vice president at Mather LifeWays Institute on Aging in Evanston.

Top building amenities include indoor aquatic centers, wellness gardens, health spas, dance studios and cyber learning centers, according to the survey.

Popular programs include volunteer opportunities for seniors in the wider community and intergenerational activities with local schools.

Basic services, such as meals and house-keeping, are also provided, of course.

But new style communities often have features such as multiple dining venues, along with specialized services—even dog walking.

The online study, "Survey of Trends in Senior Living," polled 266 senior services organizations in 26 states. More than 400 individual buildings responded to the April survey. A general observation from the study, one that should be encouraging for seniors and their families, is that buildings are becoming very customer focused.

There's a reason for this, according to Dennis Bozzi, who heads Life Services Network. The Hinsdale-based group helped frame the study along with Caring Communities Shared Services of Libertyville.

"Buildings have to be good at what they do," Bozzi said. "The days of 'build it and they will come' are over."

There's simply more competition for new residents, Bozzi explained. The group of seniors moving to retirement buildings right now, the so-called Silent Generation, is smaller than the previous generation. And until the Baby Boomers start to move to retirement projects, probably not for another 10 years, buildings will be competing for new residents.

With an emphasis on maintaining the elder's independence, buildings are focusing more on wellness rather than illness or

disabilities.

Wellness programs are offered by about half of all big buildings, with that number expected to climb to more than 80 percent by 2012, the survey said.

A local example of the kind of wellness programs being offered can be found at Brookdale Senior Living, which has nine communities in the Chicago area. Brookdale's Optimum Life program focuses on six dimensions of wellness: physical, emotional, social, intellectual, spiritual and purposeful.

"Our mission is to offer services for the whole person," said Sara Terry, vice president of Optimum Life at Brookdale's Chicago office.

Healthy dining, health screenings and fitness activities with trainers are some features of the wellness program. Brookdale is also testing a new program at Chicago-area properties called MyWay Village, a social networking Web site that allows residents to stay connected to friends and relatives.

Using their own computers, or one in the building, residents can access a custom home page that allows them to choose from a variety of activities: sending and receiving e-mail, sharing photos, listening to audio books and music, and recording memoirs.

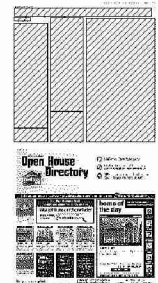
Working something like MySpace, the system lets residents post their personal profile in a directory. Residents can view the profiles and find others with similar interests. The program has increased communication among residents, said Terry.

The Mather LifeWays survey also looked at what amenities and programs senior living communities plan to offer in the future. Topping the list were technology services to link residents to their doctors and health providers. For example, a resident gets a blood pressure test at the building and the results are transmitted online immediately to the doctor.

Another emerging trend is retirement communities without walls. Buildings are starting to offer services to those who live in the wider community. About 33 percent of the communities plan to offer these services by 2012.

Communities with green features are becoming more popular too.

"Residents are concerned about this," said Hollinger-Smith at Mather LifeWays. Also, 35 percent of respondents expect to have buildings that are LEED certified, a designation for buildings that meet strict



environmental standards.

A local building seeking LEED certification is Victory Centre of South Chicago, an affordable assisted-living building at 3251 E. 92nd St. It's expected to open May 15. Recycled materials were used in construction, along with paints and finishes made without toxic chemicals. The four-acre site includes a bioswale—a system that uses plants and soil to capture storm water so sewers don't overrun in heavy rains.

All the changes in senior housing should help seniors and their families, Hollinger-Smith said. The focus on individuals and how they can best age whether in a retirement building or at home, she added, should "keep seniors independent longer."



Swimming pools such as this one at [Mather LifeWays](#) in Evanston are a common feature being incorporated into housing for seniors.