

## Local agencies offer services for seniors to keep living at home longer

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By Sarah Heth

Marilyn Manders knows if she didn't have help, she'd be in a nursing home.

The 73-year-old Holland resident lives at home with her Shih tzu Scooby, but her Parkinson's, severe pain and tendency to fall with no warning are obstacles that would be insurmountable, she says, if it weren't for the help she gets from local agencies.

"With the help, from Senior Resources (of West Michigan) and also from my caretaker ... I wouldn't be here if I didn't have those. I would have to be in a nursing home," she said. "And I've been there. And this is much better."

Manders found herself living in a nursing home after she fell and broke her femur. She stayed in a nursing home for several months while she recovered. She said the people were kind, but living in a nursing home takes away a level of independence most don't want to give up.

"I like things done a certain way," she said with a laugh. From simple things like the way she organizes her closet to the type of laundry detergent she uses, living at home allows her to maintain her independence as much as possible, even as her mobility declines.

Her nursing home stay wasn't forever, and as soon as she could, she found an apartment in subsidized housing - but that wouldn't be an option if it weren't for help she gets from Senior Resources and SafeHome Healthcare, which are just two of many available resources to seniors like Manders in the area.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 13.6 percent of Ottawa County's population is 65 years or older, as of July 1, 2015. In Allegan County, the percentage is 15.5.

For those seniors living at home with limited mobility, the needs might be as simple as someone to vacuum the house or as complicated as a nurse to check vitals and medication. Residents might need help with meal preparation, lawn care or transportation. They might need personal care, such as bathing or grooming, or even something more complicated, such as help with medication or medical help that doesn't require a full-time nurse.

"It's far more cost-effective to keep someone in their homes with these services," Henriet Meyers, RN and supports coordinator with Senior Resources, said. "Most people prefer to be in their own home."

Whatever the need, there is a plethora of local agencies and nonprofits that offer services. From Senior Resources of West Michigan to LifeCircles PACE to Evergreen - which has a Commons for active, mobile seniors, and a Day Center for less mobile seniors - and dozens of other agencies, Ottawa and Allegan counties can offer a way for its older residents to live at home longer.

And for their caregivers - often family members - this can make all the difference.

"I think we can't forget about their caregivers," said Jo Ver Beek, director at Care Services of Evergreen. "They may need a substitute to provide care while they are gone or just need a break."

It can lighten the burden and allow them to maintain their relationship.

"If there's another service or outside connection, that burden lightens a bit," Sarah Milanowski, intake & outreach coordinator at LifeCircles PACE, said. "And that caregiver can have a conversation with their loved one that isn't about what they need."

Mostly, though, it's all about allowing local seniors to maintain their independence in the safest way possible.

"We focus on not just what's the matter with them, but what matters to them, improving independence with our therapy teams to help them live in the community," Mitkowski said. "We provide whatever it is that person needs to help them maintain their independence and safety."

Meyers echoed that. "Our goal here with Marilyn is to keep her as independent as safe as possible," she said.