Journal of Housing for the Elderly, 23:283–303, 2009

ISSN: 0276-3893 print / 1540-353X online
DOI: 10.1080/02763890903326970

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Aging in a Community of Mutual Support: The Emergence of an Elder Intentional Cohousing Community in the United States

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This initial report details the origin, development, and "charter residents" of the new ElderSpirit Community, a resident-managed elder-only cohousing community focusing on mutual support and affordable housing. The 33 resident sample was white, 79% female, averaged 70.4 years of age (range = 63 to 84 years), and was more likely to be childless and/or divorced/never married compared to the general older population. Mutual support was significant in choosing the ElderSpirit Community, and this case demonstrates that elders can proactively choose this new option: living intentionally with neighbors to provide an added layer of support. The ElderSpirit Community is important given the caregiver shortage and desire for nursing home alternatives.

KEYWORDS cohousing, sense of community, mutual support, living arrangements, affordable housing, non-kin caregiving, spirituality

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Both the ElderSpirit Community and this research have received grant support from the Retirement Research Foundation. The author recognizes individuals for their help in making ElderSpirit Community a reality, including Dene Peterson, Catherine Rumschlag, and Kathy Hutson. Monica Appleby, Anne Leibig, and Jean Marie Luce worked with the author in 2001 to create the model of late-life spirituality included in this article. The author also thanks Monica Appleby, a resident of the ElderSpirit Community, for opening up her home to the author during on-site research and for coordinating the interview schedule, and all of the residents of the ElderSpirit Community who generously agreed to give of their time to participate in the study. Finally, the author thanks Marilyn Schroeder for her assistance with data management and helpful comments on the manuscript.

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INTRODUCTION

The appearance of elder intentional communities is a distinct new option now emerging as an alternative to the traditional ways in which we have provided "senior housing" and long-term care. The elder intentional community model puts choice into the hands of the older adults themselves, allowing them to proactively choose how and where they will live their later years and with whom they will grow old. It is a radical "do-it-yourself" approach in which older adults envision and implement the elder intentional community. Exploring these communities involves a careful characterization of (1) how and where they have arisen; (2) the objectives and expectations of the older adults who are pioneering this type of a development; (3) the physical and organizational structures of elder intentional communities; and (4) the nature and effectiveness of their various scenarios for providing personal care. Some of the earliest elder intentional communities have chosen to use the elder cohousing model for their physical and organizational structures and interest in this model is growing. This article describes the origin and structure of the ElderSpirit Community (ESC), one of the first elder intentional communities in the United States that chose to adapt the cohousing model, and provides a portrait of the "charter residents" of the ESC. The immediate significance of this study is that it describes a type of elder community that has not been analyzed before but has now emerged and is becoming more widely established.

The ESC, which opened in 2006 in Abingdon, Virginia, espouses mutual support as a value. It is the only publicly identified low-to-moderate income and mixed-ownership elder cohousing community in the United States. Cohousing has existed in the United States for more than 30 years but is only now being adopted for elder-only communities. Cohousing communities are characterized by resident management and decision making (Durrett, 2009) and are designed to encourage a sense of community among residents. With these attributes, elder cohousing has the potential to provide a better quality of living for many older adults.

Another goal of some elder cohousing communities is provision of mutual support, which could become a benefit with significant consequences. The population older than 65 years will double by 2030, but the population of traditional caregivers (women between 25 to 50 years) will increase only slightly during this period (Day, 1996), and the baby boomer generation is more likely than past generations to have only one or no children (National Center for Health Statistics, 2005). The question of whether elders could help take care of one another becomes a critical area of research. In the United States, where independence is emphasized, we seldom choose to live in a close community setting, but this arrangement might be exactly what is needed for some individuals as they age. Furthermore, many elders fail to plan ahead and instead wait until a crisis occurs, making them dependent

and landing them in institutions. Little work thus far has explored the potential of non-kin, non-paid caregiving (e.g., Barker, 2002), especially among older peers. How do we cultivate such care? This question is among those to be addressed in the future as the case study of ESC evolves. What has been widely substantiated and will be demonstrated in this article is that preplanning can occur and that elders can proactively choose a new option: living and aging intentionally "in community."

The Elder Cohousing Concept

Cohousing communities are designed to encourage the development of a sense of neighborhood and community. McCamant and Durrett (1994) are credited with coining the term "cohousing" and launching the idea in the United States in the 1970s. Intergenerational cohousing communities have developed in at least 21 states, with approximately 5,000 Americans living in more than 90 cohousing communities (Perrigan, 2006; Williams, 2005).

The original cohousing concept is associated with Denmark, although similar communities could also be found in Sweden and the Netherlands (Meltzer, 2005). Key common features identified by Fromm (1991) and cited in Brenton (2001) include "common facilities; private dwellings; resident-structured routines; resident management; design for social contact; resident participation in the development process; and pragmatic social objectives" (p. 171). Although cohousing has been touted as a solution to empower women and single parents (Horelli & Vepsa, 1994) and to overcome suburban alienation (Scanzoni, 2000), relatively little has been written about cohousing for older adults. The existing research literature focuses on developments outside of the United States (e.g., Andresen & Runge, 2002; Brenton, 2001; Choi, 2004). Elder cohousing is more common in Europe; for example, there are 2,800 elder cohousing units in Sweden and 2,100 in the Netherlands.

In these countries, it is not viewed as a nursing home alternative, but residents may receive home help around the clock if needed. Neighbors may also provide support to each other, and in fact residents do appear to help each other more than in conventional housing (Choi, 2004). A pilot group in the United Kingdom was described as advantageous because "it is addressing the challenge of aging . . . in promoting continued independence, an active life and mutual support by means of a self-help formula which should reduce demands made on local services" (Brenton, 2001, p. 183).

As a group, older adults in the Dutch CoHousing Communities committed to mutual support for their members (Brenton, 2001). Approximately 200 communities have formed there since 1981, ranging from 6 to 70 units. In their experience, the number most conducive to promoting this sense of community is between 30 and 40 individuals. Female residents outnumber male residents by approximately three to one, and the average age is

approximately 70 years. Most European older cohousers are among the relatively "young old." An overview of Danish elder cohousing shows the average resident age at the time of moving in is 62 years (Andresen & Runge, 2002) and the average age of residents overall is 70 years (Choi, 2004), similar to the Dutch. European research shows that residents feel positive toward both the social and physical environment (Andresen & Runge, 2002) and the majority (75.7%) would strongly recommend this option to others (Choi, 2004).

Much has been written about the physical design of intergenerational cohousing communities (Durrett, 2009; Meltzer, 2005; Williams, 2005) and the use of social contact design. The neighborhood design and the inclusion of communal facilities, such as a common house where meals can be shared, are key elements. The common house may also contain a mail room, a laundry room, and other features, with the goals of promoting the interaction of residents and sharing space and function to live more simply. Thus, there is often a lesser emphasis on materialism and ownership (Meltzer, 2005; Williams, 2005). Building the units close together and sharing common green spaces are also part of this orientation, which contrasts with the traditional suburban neighborhood where people drive home, park in their garages, and may not see their neighbors at all. Cars in cohousing communities are parked away from the units; some communities are car free (Williams, 2005). Units are typically smaller than average, with the idea that some functions can be conducted in the common spaces.

Among other features characteristic of cohousing (Durrett, 2009; Fromm, 1991), there are four of note that are organizational. The first characteristic is a participatory process, which optimally begins before or during the design phase. The second characteristic is resident management; there is no staff supervision. The third characteristic is non-hierarchal structure and decision making. In many communities, decisions must be reached by consensus, which may require more effort than simply voting on issues. The fourth characteristic is that there is no shared community economy, which separates this model from traditional "communes."

Making the Elder Cohousing Concept Operational

A small group of pioneers launched an experiment in rural Abingdon, Virginia, to provide an alternative to traditional options for older adults: a community of mutual support. They created ESC, one of the first elder cohousing communities in the nation. The first residents began to move into ESC in February 2006.

The founders of ESC are members of a community service and action group called the Federation of Communities in Service (FOCIS), which has been in existence since 1967. Some members of this core group have a long history together. One member, Dene Peterson, challenged the group to think

about how they would like to live as they aged. A committee was formed in 1995 called FOCIS Futures. They recognized that not all caregiving answers are going to come from families and corporations, and they were the catalyst for the development of ESC. The founders have made ESC unique from other types of housing options in several ways.

First, ESC was created by a group of elders who had a vision, wanted something different, participated in the planning and design, and created the reality, overcoming many obstacles along the way. Second, they chose to use the cohousing format that, as an elder-only model, was new in the United States. Third, ESC is designed for moderate- to low-income residents, again an anomaly as most cohousing (and indeed, most traditional retirement communities), target middle- to high-income individuals. It encompasses renters in federally subsidized housing and owners in the same community and is thus also, in effect, an experiment in affordable housing. Fourth, it is self-managed by the residents who make decisions by consensus. When major conflicts arise, ESC residents get together for a "clearinghouse" to talk through the issue. Fifth, consistent with the cohousing model, there is no shared economy. Sixth, ESC places an emphasis on spirituality, broadly defined. Finally, and arguably most importantly, ESC aspires to be a community of mutual support. This project differs from the past because, with these characteristics, such an intentional cohousing community for elders is new in the United States.

Development

The FOCIS Futures group took the organizational role, but a 501C-3 entity named Trailview Development Corporation (now called the ElderSpirit Development Corporation) was created in 1999 to own the land, borrow the finances, and build the buildings. Peterson became Executive Director of Trailview Development Corporation and served as the developer with guidance from the Trailview Development Corporation board. According to my interviews with Peterson, who is now an ESC resident, the fundraising for ESC began with a grant of $240,000 from the Retirement Research Foundation. The Trailview Development Corporation ultimately raised more than $3.6 million, primarily from three public monies and a variety of private funding sources, including foundations, home sales, and private donations, but it required a great deal of persistence.

The Trailview Development Corporation continues to own the land while homeowners own the footprint and external aspect of their homes. They are considered fee simple homes in which the purchaser has full ownership, not condominiums. The base price for two-bedroom homes with 960 square feet was $122,679 and the base price for a one-bedroom home with 760 square feet was $99,479. Homeowners pay $150 per month for

maintenance. The 16 federally subsidized rental homes cost between $300 and $505 monthly. The monthly rental income is adequate to make regular loan payments and half of the appreciation goes back to ESC if a home is sold. Property management is now handled by the development corporation. ESC is resident-managed through the ESC Residents' Association, which makes decisions by consensus.

The Community Design

Consistent with characteristics outlined in overviews of European elder cohousing (Andresen & Runge, 2002), ESC is newly-built and units face the common area. It has 29 units (Figure 1), comparable to the Danish average of 20 to 30 units, where they found 24 units to be ideal in size (Brenton, 2001). At ESC, the 13 owned houses are one-story and grouped in duplexes and triplexes on one side of the common green space, while two floors incorporating 12 rental units are in two separate buildings on the other side. The latter design was determined by the steepness of the site, which allows all units to be entered from ground level. The units on the upper level have

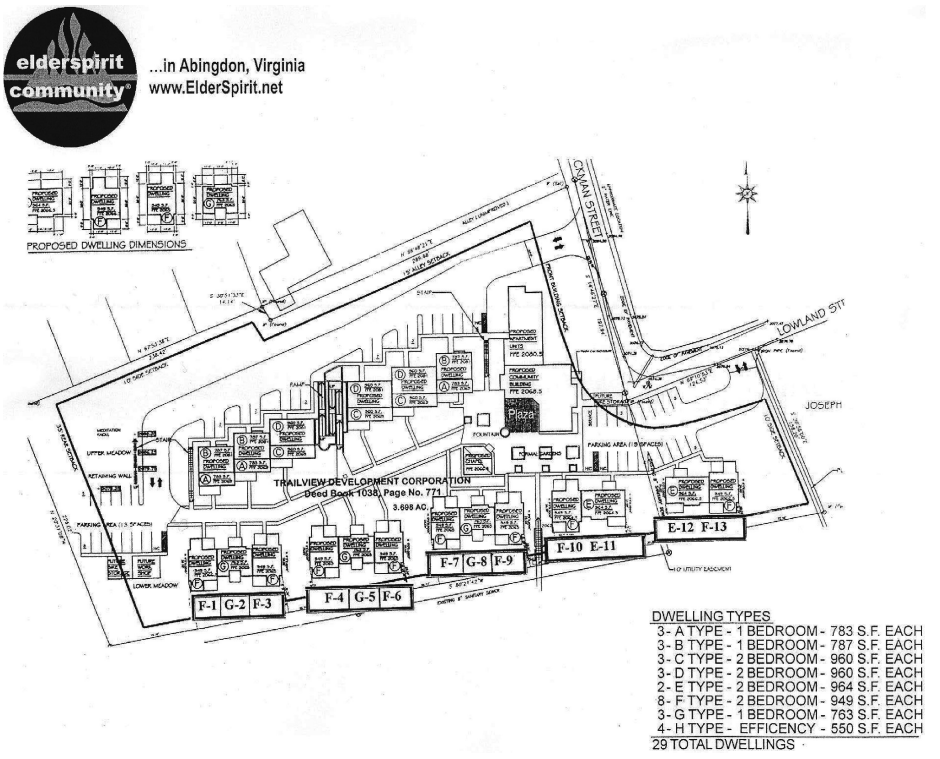

FIGURE 1 Plan for ElderSpirit Community at Trailview. Reprinted with permission of ElderSpirit Community, Inc.

parking at the door, whereas all other residents must park in lots at either end of the community. Four small rental apartments are included in the Common House and were completed after the other units. Weather challenges contributed to a delay in completing the Common House, which did not open until November 2007. The Common House is toward one end rather than in the middle and a small "Spirit House" was erected at the other end. Additionally, there is a house adjacent to the ESC property in which two FOCIS members have lived for several years as the plans for ESC developed and became a reality. Two other women have recently moved into an apartment in this house as well, drawn by the ESC model. Although physically located slightly "up the hill" from ESC, these four individuals are very involved with and part of ESC, in effect adding two more units to make the total number of units 31. In addition, there are four individuals who are now off campus but still involved in the community as of 2008.

Model of Late Life Spirituality

As the Trailview Development Corporation was dealing with developing the physical architecture for the future community, an ESC Strategic Planning Task Force composed of Monica Appleby, Anne Leibig, and Jean Marie Luce who were working with the author, was formed to consider the "spiritual architecture." An initial influence had been an article by Leder (1996) about spiritual communities for elders in which he referred to an "ElderSpirit Center," which led to the choice of the name ElderSpirit for the community. Leder visited Abingdon in June 2001 and May 2002 and participated in ESC workshops.

In August 2001, as part of an early visioning process, the ESC Strategic Planning Task Force started meetings that continued over a period of several months. A *Model of Late Life Spirituality,* broadly defined, was created by the Task Force (Figure 2). We chose to focus on the more inclusive concept of "spirituality," in contrast to "religion," which generally reflects more organized institutions, because we did not want to limit ESC to any one denomination. Although we found various definitions of spirituality in relation to aging and were familiar with the "conscious aging" literature of that time (e.g., Das, 2000; Leder, 1996, 1997; Moody & Carroll, 1998), we ultimately developed our own definition: "Spirituality is defined as the creative life in relationship with a Higher Power, self, community, and the earth, which promotes meaning in later life." We found no spirituality model adequate to meet our desired purpose.

Thus, a model was created by the ESC Strategic Planning Task Force drawing from several sessions of brainstorming and our own experience and then incorporating feedback from the ESC Prospective Residents Group members. In this model, the six dimensions of spirituality are specified: Inner

Late Life Spirituality in the ElderSpirit Community® (ESC)

This Conceptual Model identifies facets of late-life spirituality valued by initiating members of the ElderSpirit Community at Trailview. As a reflective experience the Conceptual Model is evolving and will change with more experience and reflection. These facets have been categorized for ease in understanding; recognizing they weave a whole that is greater than can be described.

DIMENSION	Inner Work	Caring for Oneself	Mutual Support	Community Service	Reverence for Creation	Creative Life
ASPECTS	Seeking meaning in life Seeking Spirit in small and large experiences Willingness to face the mystery of death Freedom of religion Learning lessons from life	Physical health Mental health Kindness to self; Forgiveness of others. Taking oneself with lightness & laughter Connecting with family and friends Speaking your truth	Face- to- face relationships Shared Meals Celebrations Helping care for the ill and dying Respect for each other's history and traditions	Kindness toward others Compassion toward those in need Social awareness and action	Respectful relationship with nature Less emphasis on materialism/ consumerism Awareness of the Beauty of the Earth Caring for animals, trees and plants	Recognizing gifts & talents, your own and others. Affirming one's legacy to others Awareness of ancestors Openness to change Addressing "unlived" aspects of life
EXEMPLIFIED BY	Interactive relationship with a Higher Power Regular spiritual practice, i.e.: Yoga, Prayer, Meditation, Stillness, Tai Chi, Respecting the practices of others	Aerobic exercises Outdoor activities: Gardening, Walking, Biking Mental exercise: Reading, Puzzles, Games. Ability to ask for help when needed Noticing losses: physical, mental and social Allowing oneself to grieve the losses	Birthday/holiday celebrations Attention to the needs of caregivers Listening well; clearly expressing oneself Giving and receiving support Asking for help when needed Avoiding the need to "fix" others	Attention to challenges of aging Volunteer work Involvement with neighborhood Civic responsibilities Seeking a just and loving world	Simple lifestyle Consideration for the environment in decisions & actions Companion animals Less reliance on cars Recycling Organic gardening, use of local foods	Artistic activities Life long learning Personal story telling Responding to limitations that may accompany aging and/or illness Doing something new Pursuing dreams

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FIGURE 2 ElderSpirit Community: Conceptual Model of Late Life Spirituality. Reprinted with permission of ElderSpirit Community, Inc.

Work, Caring for Oneself, Mutual Support, Community Service, Reverence for Creation, and Creative Life. These six dimensions emerged from the values first identified by FOCIS Futures; these values were modified and others were added. Aspects of each dimension are outlined in the model. In addition, examples of how these dimensions might be "lived out" are included in the "Exemplified by" section. This model was part of an effort to begin to articulate how ESC might look and feel and provides a conceptualization of the underlying philosophy. During our brainstorming, the model went through several iterations, and slight adjustments to the model continued through 2007 based on input from the FOCIS Futures Committee. The concept of mutual support has been further described by Appleby, Leibig, and Luce as part of an ESC Extension Project to be a dynamic relationship involving three actions/interactions: (1) caring for self, (2) being able to ask for and receive support, and (3) giving support.

The ESC spirituality model finds parallels in the work of Tornstam (2005). In his theory of positive aging, he categorizes three dimensions of gerotranscendence: the cosmic, the self, and the social and personal relationships dimensions. Both models reflect a focus on altruism and a simplification

of life accompanied by a decrease in acquisitiveness expressed in the ESC model as less materialism.

Associated with the ESC model, a "Goodness of Fit" tool (Figure 3) was developed to help elders decide whether this type of community might be appropriate for them. This tool is included on the ESC web site and in the

ElderSpirit Community is the name chosen by a group of older adults committed to spiritual growth, caring for one another, respect for the earth, and service to the larger community. This questionnaire is designed to help you decide if the ElderSpirit Community (ESC) might be a "good fit" for you and your interests. Read the following statements and note whether you agree or disagree.

	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
I respect other spiritual paths and do not hold mine as the only one.			
I have or would like to have a regular spiritual practice.			
I try to be as physically active as my health allows.			
I am interested in learning new things.			
I value a sense of community with others.			
I would like to participate in some group activities.			
I am willing to give some time to ESC work and responsibilities.			
I have a history of volunteer work and might like to continue.			
I would like to give and receive caring support as I age.			
I value the environment and act accordingly (recycling, etc.).			
I would like to further develop my gifts and talents and encourage others to develop theirs.			
I am open to change.			
I appreciate diversity in a community.			
I am willing to face the mysteries of aging and death.			

If you agree with most or all of these statements, you might be a good fit for membership in the ElderSpirit Community. For more information about ElderSpirit Community, or their co-housing neighborhood, please contact us at:

ElderSpirit Community
P.O. Box 665
Abingdon, Virginia 24212
(276) 628-8908
info@elderspirit.net

Goodness of Fit, Approved by FOCIS Board, 12/20/01 © FOCIS

FIGURE 3 ElderSpirit Community "Goodness of Fit" Questionnaire. Reprinted with permission of ElderSpirit Community, Inc.

application packet and can be used by interested individuals to "self-select" those who are looking for a community that holds the values outlined in the spirituality model. Residents must also meet other criteria as outlined on the ESC web site. The household head must be 55 years or older, with all residents at least 40 years and at least one household member must meet independent living requirements. Renters must qualify as moderate to low income per Virginia's guidelines for government-financed housing and ESC must meet the Fair Housing & Equal Opportunity regulations for this rental housing.

Before construction began, many efforts were made by those associated with ESC to involve potential residents through courses, retreats, informal meals and get-togethers, and formal planning sessions. These efforts created opportunities to begin to build a sense of community during the lengthy construction period. Potential residents also had opportunities to play a role in the design process, and in fact owners were given many individual choices in the construction details of their units.

An avowed hope of the ESC founders was that residents could remain at home until they died if at all possible. Although some researchers (Jason & Kobayashi, 1995; Putnam, 2001) believe that the "sense of community" has diminished in our society over time, elder cohousing offers a way to build and strengthen that sense. Can a group of elders develop a sense of community that will be strong enough to see them through difficult times? The answers to this question are crucial to the well-being and quality of life for adults in their later years.

DESIGN AND METHODS

Residents began to move into ESC in February 2006. To interview and collect baseline data on these residents, I approached the ESC Residents' Association with the idea for a study, received full cooperation, and was even able to stay with a resident on-site while conducting the research, allowing for additional opportunities to observe the community. The interview guide was developed with input from a team of ESC residents through meetings prior to starting the on-site pilot study. The fact that I had already established a good rapport with and been accepted by the ESC residents is significant, particularly because a few respondents referred to the fact that some residents have begun to truly feel like "an experiment." ESC has received attention from many quarters, having been featured in the *New York Times* (Brown, 2006), *Wall Street Journal* (Greene, 2006), *Time* (Abrahms, 2006), and other media. I obtained Human Subjects approval from the University of Georgia Institutional Review Board to conduct these interviews and surveys. An informed consent form is reviewed and must be signed by each

participant before an interview. Confidentiality and anonymity are assured when reporting findings.

Research Design

Appropriately for the study of a new and innovative model program, this case study is an implementation evaluation. The basic project design is to complete collection of baseline descriptive data and then conduct a longitudinal study over a 3-year period. Because ESC is a new experiment, I am using a mixed methods research design; I conducted in-depth interviews and collected "quasi-statistics" (Becker, 1970) via a written questionnaire.

Residents were informed about the research project by the ESC Residents' Association. All participants received written information explaining the project and their voluntary choice to participate. All interviews were performed face-to-face after reviewing the informed consent form and obtaining the signature of each participant. Participants were then asked to complete the questionnaire. The data were analyzed by two researchers to promote accuracy.

Data Collection and Analysis

The interview instrument was piloted in an on-site study in the summer of 2006. I conducted in-depth interviews and collected data from all but one of the 22 residents who moved in during the first 6 months. This number included the two women in the house adjacent to ESC because they are FOCIS members who have been involved with ESC. In July 2007, I returned to complete interviews with the remainder of the "charter residents" who had subsequently moved in and conducted a second interview with the 2006 participants. Of the 39 individuals who are considered to be the first residents of each of the 31 units, 33 (84.6%) were interviewed. Five chose not to participate, and in fact did not participate generally in the community, and one was unable to participate due to absence. The quantitative data reported here were compiled and analyzed using basic descriptive statistics for the sample of 33.

Initial Survey

Each participant completed a short questionnaire addressing basic demographics such as age, education, and occupation. I also queried participants about their support systems (parents, children, siblings, and close friends) and their proximity and frequency of contact. Inquiries identifying which aspects were most important in their decision to move to the ESC and items

regarding their functional status and health were also included to obtain baseline data. These results can be compared to data from other groups and the general population and will be compared to further data collected longitudinally at ESC.

RESULTS

This sample of the first ESC residents ($N = 33$) is white and predominantly female, with only one of the seven males living alone. The average age is 70.36 years (range = 63 to 84 years). A demographic profile of these residents is contained in Table 1. The average level of education reported is more than 5 years above high school graduation. One person reported less than completion of high school or GED, with more than half (n = 17) having graduate degrees. The variety of occupations reflects the diversity among elders. Occupations ranged from community developer/activist, office worker, teacher, minister, city manager, engineer, librarian, therapist, cook, meteorologist, naturopath, photographer, business executive, and auto body repair.

Despite the origins of ESC within FOCIS, only five of the charter residents were FOCIS members; residents migrated from all over the United States to join ESC, even without previously knowing anyone there. Retreats held prior to the opening helped spread the word about ESC. The charter

TABLE 1 Demographic Profile of ElderSpirit Community Charter Residents (N = 33)[a]

Variable	Number	Percentage
Female	26	79
Age (y)		
60–64	7	21
65–74	18	55
75 and older	8	24
Marital status		
Never married	6	18
Married	12	36
Divorced	7	21
Widowed	8	24
Occupational categories		
Commercial/business	19	58
Human services	10	30
Other	4	12
Annual household income		
<$20,000	6	19
$20,000 < 35,000	14	45
$35,000 < 55,000	8	26
$55,000 < 75,000	3	10

[a]Except for income, where N = 31.

residents of ESC came from 14 different states, including California, Florida, Maine, and Virginia. Two-thirds (n = 22) came from the Southeast, 4 from the Midwest, 5 from the Northeast, and 2 from the West Coast.

Social Networks

In exploring relationships, only one resident reported a living parent. As far as children, more than one-quarter (n = 9; 27%) reported they never had children. Overall, 11 (33%) had lost at least one sibling to death, with two respondents stating they had only one sibling and that sibling had died. As seen in Table 2, respondents were much more likely to have frequent (at least weekly) contact with their children (75%) and their friends (70%) compared to siblings (30%) if they had any. When asked how many self-defined "*very* close friends" they felt they had in their lifetime, most reported 10 or fewer (range = 1 to 30). Approximately one-third (n = 10; 30%) reported having lost close friends to death, yielding a mean of 5.5 living friends.

When asked, "If you needed help with your home and personal care due to a health problem, how likely would you be to ask any of these individuals to help you?," a significant pattern emerged indicating that participants are counting on their ESC neighbors (Table 3). Approximately 80% reported they were "very likely" to ask other ESC residents for help compared to about one-third who would "very likely" ask their children. Adding the "somewhat likely" category shows that all but one participant expected to ask their ESC neighbors for assistance. Over one-quarter of the respondents reported being "very likely" to ask other friends outside of the ESC; fewer reported being "very likely" to ask their siblings. Among respondents, 14 (42%) named two sources of support as "very likely," 13 (39%) named only one, 4 (12%) named

TABLE 2 Social Networks of ElderSpirit Community Charter Residents (N = 33)[a]

Income	Number	Percentage	Mean	Range
Respondents with children	24	73	2.3	0–7
Of these, communicate weekly with at least one child	18	75		
Respondents with siblings	29	88	2.9	0–14
Those with living siblings	27	82		
Of these, communicate weekly with at least one sibling	8	30		
Respondents with very close friends	33	100	6.8*	1–30
Of these, communicate weekly with at least one very close friend	23	70		

[a]One respondent reported the death of a child, but still had other living children. Ten (30%) residents reported deaths among very close friends; the mean of living friends was 5.5. In both cases, the number remained the same, unlike the case with siblings.

TABLE 3 Likelihood of ElderSpirit Community Respondents Asking Family and Friends for Help (N = 33)

Relationship	Very Likely Number (%)	Somewhat Likely Number (%)	Not at All Likely Number (%)	N/A No Answer Number (%)
Children	12 (36)	6 (18)	6 (18)	9 (27)
Brothers/sisters	6 (18)	7 (21)	12 (36)	8 (24)
Friends in ESC	26 (79)	6 (18)	1 (3)	0 (0)
Friends outside ESC	9 (27)	13 (39)	8 (24)	3 (9)

three, and 4 (6%) residents did not consider any of these sources as "very likely."

Health

Of arthritis, diabetes mellitus, hypertension, heart disease, and cancer, only three of 32 (9%) participants reported having none of these chronic conditions. Fourteen (44%) reported only one, 11 (34%) had two, and 4 (13%) had three of the conditions. High blood pressure and arthritis were most common; half the respondents reported one or the other or both (Table 4).

Over half of the 32 participants who responded to this question self-reported their physical health at the time of the first interview as "excellent" or "very good," while even more (69%) self-reported their mental health as "excellent" or "very good" (Table 5). None reported their physical or mental health as "poor." When asked to compare their current health to that 1 year ago, 6 (19%) and 9 (28%) reported improvements in their physical and mental health, respectively; 4 (13%) reported worsening physical health and 1 reported worsening mental health.

Generally, respondents reported that they were independent with basic and instrumental activities of daily living. Two respondents reported that the only help needed was the use of assistive devices when walking. Two

TABLE 4 Chronic Health Conditions Reported by ElderSpirit Community Respondents[a]

Condition	Number Reporting Condition (%)	Number Taking Medications for Condition (Number)	Proportion Taking Medications of Those With the Condition
Arthritis	17 (53)	6	35
Cancer	8 (25)	3	38
Diabetes mellitus	1 (3)	1	100
Heart disease	6 (19)	6	100
Hypertension	16 (50)	15	94

[a]One did not respond, n = 32.
Since some respondents had multiple conditions, the total does not equal 32.

TABLE 5 Self-reported Physical and Mental Health of ElderSpirit Community Respondents[a]

Rating of Health	Physical Health Number (%)	Mental Health Number (%)
Excellent	5 (16)	10 (31)
Very good	13 (41)	12 (38)
Good	9 (28)	9 (28)
Fair	5 (16)	1 (3)
Poor	0 (0)	0 (0)

[a]One did not respond, n = 32.

respondents needed some help with at least one activity, at least temporarily, particularly one participant who had sustained a hospitalization since moving in. All respondents reported having a car.

DECISION TO MOVE TO ESC

Respondents were asked to rate the importance of several reasons in deciding to move to ESC, with 1 equal to "Not important at all" and 5 equal to "Extremely important." They were then asked which one reason was most important to the decision. Table 6 shows the reasons ranked by mean score along with the number and percent who chose that item as the most important factor. "Sense of community" was ranked highest with "mutual support," a "simplified lifestyle," and the spiritual component also highly valued. Considering the importance of the spiritual dimension in choosing to move to the ESC, it is notable that respondents' answers ranged widely when asked to describe their religious affiliation. Religions/churches that were represented included Catholic, Eastern/Hindu, Episcopal, Methodist, and Unitarian;

TABLE 6 ESC Respondents' Reasons for Decision to Move to ElderSpirit Community[a]

Reason	Mean Score[b]	Number Who Chose as Most Important (%)
Sense of community	4.61	12 (40)
Mutual support	4.53	6 (20)
Simplified lifestyle	4.25	2 (7)
Spiritual component	4.15	5 (17)
Cost	3.69	1 (3)
Location	3.64	1 (3)
Something new	3.56	2 (7)
Live with peers	3.56	1 (3)
Climate	2.97	0 (0)
Friends living there	2.44	0 (0)

[a]Three did not respond, n = 30.
[b]Scale: 1 = "Not important at all" to 5 = "Extremely important".

several respondents reported no religious affiliation or made comments such as "open," "very connected," and "greater force."

DISCUSSION

This sample of ESC charter residents presents a diverse population in many aspects. They migrated from all over the United States, from as far away as California to this community in rural Virginia. While broadly defined spirituality is a feature of ESC, as outlined in the *Model of Late Life Spirituality* (Figure 2), no one religion or belief dominates. The diversity of occupations is consistent with Danish research (Andresen & Runge, 2002), which found that "It is very common that residents have very different backgrounds in employment: craftsmen, academics, teachers, housewives, etc" (p. 157). Homogeneity within a community is found to encourage social interaction (Williams, 2005), and although diverse in many ways, respondents are generally homogeneous in social class and race and are mostly well-educated, typical of traditional cohousers. Their generally lower income levels are unlike cohousers. As in Dutch elder cohousing (Brenton, 2001), women outnumbered men three to one.

Future-proofing requires that there are both young-old and older residents in the community (Brenton, 2001). If residents are in the same age range, they will all age together; it may become difficult to attract new, younger residents to keep the community vibrant and functioning. Many European elder cohousing communities strive to incorporate a mix of ages, including younger residents in their 50s (Brenton, 2001). One community in the Netherlands in 1997 had 20 residents in their 50s, 15 in their 60s, and 13 in their 70s. At ESC, there is approximately a 20-year span in ages, ranging from 63 to 84 years. This distribution is similar to the Nijmegen community except the groups are each a decade older, starting in their 60s rather than 50s. Their average age at move in of 70.36 years is above the average age of 62 years reported in the Danish studies (Andresen & Runge, 2002).

The percentages reporting the two most common health conditions were similar to the 2004–2005 national averages for those aged 65 years and older: 48% with hypertension and 47% with diagnosed arthritis (Greenberg, 2006). The percentage reporting cancer was also comparable to the national average of 20%, whereas the percentages reporting diabetes mellitus and heart disease were lower than the national averages of 16% and 29%, respectively.

More than half the participants self-reported their physical health as "excellent" or "very good." This percentage is higher than the national average for noninstitutionalized older adults, which has recently been variously reported as between approximately 25% (National Institute on Aging, 2007) to 38.3% (Greenberg, 2006). These findings suggest that, although the sample population has not escaped common chronic conditions, they are

more likely than the general older population to consider themselves very healthy. Two-thirds self-reported their mental health as "excellent" or "very good."

It was striking that only one resident reported a living parent. The percentage would be expected to be higher, especially for those in their 60s; nationally, at least 10% of those older than 65 years have living parents (Nussbaum, 1997). It is likely that freedom from the responsibilities of caregiving for their parents may be key to allowing respondents to choose to move to an experimental community such as ESC. With the "old-old" (age 85 years and older) being the fastest growing age group, many over the age of 65 years are finding themselves with ongoing caregiving responsibilities; a centenarian may be cared for by a child who is 80 years or older. These responsibilities may preclude an individual from considering this option.

The sample is also less likely to be married compared to more than half (53.2%) of those 65 years and older nationally (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006) and less likely to be widowed compared to the national average of 31.7%. Conversely, the sample had higher percentages of those who are divorced and those who never married compared to 9.3% and 4.6% of the national population, respectively. The percentage in the sample who reported no children was also high compared to national data, which shows that for all age groups 55 years and older, including those 85 years and older, between 85% and 90% have children (National Institute on Aging, 2007). The sample appears to be at or above average in the percentage who reported having living siblings (Bedford & Avioli, 2001).

Mutual support was clearly identified as a driving reason for respondents to move to the ESC. A majority identified "friends within ESC" as the individuals that they are "very likely" to call on if help with home/personal care were needed. This finding confirms the possibility of non-kin caregiving and reinforces the importance of ESC founders choosing to focus on mutual support. The fact that respondents were twice as likely to communicate regularly with friends as with siblings suggests further support for the notion of "fictive kin" (Jordan-Marsh & Harden, 2005) and our closeness to those "families" we choose for ourselves.

Limitations of this study were that it focused only on this one community, not all residents participated, and no control group was used for comparison. However, a supplemental instrument was developed and piloted in 2008, which can ultimately be used in other settings as well as for comparisons across time. The possibility of some bias with regard to the community must be noted, despite efforts to be objective, in that I did have a prior consulting relationship with the founders of the ESC and was involved with the development of the *Model of Late Life Spirituality* and the *Goodness of Fit* documents. Four years passed before I again became involved with the ESC, and only after the residents began to move in. On the positive side, the early connection helped provide an "entrée" into the community

and having one of the residents, with whom I had previously collaborated, help arrange the schedule of interviews likely facilitated the establishment of trust between the interviewer and the respondents. It could also be argued that having the knowledge and understanding of the history of how ESC came into existence and of the individuals involved, which the majority of the residents do not know, gives additional insight that few others would possess.

CONCLUSION

The ESC provides some advantages compared to other elder housing choices. Being able to self-govern in a community of peers instead of having someone telling you what to do is a radical idea for this age group in our society. The charter residents are generally well educated and are likely to currently consider themselves as relatively healthy. They have few caregiving responsibilities for their parents. By choosing ESC, residents have demonstrated that they can proactively choose a style of living that offers an innovative approach to caring for themselves and each other. Higher proportions of never married, divorced, and childless individuals were drawn to ESC, compared to the national population, and the proportions of the older population who fit into these categories will be even larger in the years to come. Because the family has long been the focus for providing caregiving, these individuals will be particularly challenged to find innovative ways to meet their needs as they age. Respondents at ESC confirmed definite interest in the concept of mutual support and non-kin peer caregiving.

Cohousing also provides the twin opportunities of being able to easily engage with others and being able to return to one's own home when time alone is desired. Several community theorists cited in Williams (2005) suggested that "resident involvement in the development and operation of communities, non-hierarchical social structures, formalized social activities, and common goals are instrumental in developing strong social networks and increasing the cohesiveness of communities" (p. 154). Support for cohousing comes not only from community theorists, but also from social theory (Homans, 1968), environment-behavior theory (Meltzer, 2005), social network theory (Kadushin, 2004), and social capital theory (Pretty & Ward, 2001).

Although ESC is among the first, other intentional communities specifically for older adults are appearing in other parts of the United States. One definition of a movement is when related phenomena are emerging independent of each other, as is happening at this moment. At this point, there is no "cookie cutter" pattern for such communities and they are already showing intriguing permutations. In future research, the experience of residents in elder-only cohousing communities will also be compared with elders who

live in intergenerational cohousing communities, other forms of elder intentional communities, and other "senior" housing arrangements, such as independent living apartment buildings.

The overall goal of the larger study is to determine whether this intentional elder cohousing community succeeds in meeting expectations and maintaining or improving quality of life for the residents through exploration of provision of care by neighbors, self-reported health, satisfaction, social network development, "communal coping," the environment, and the role of spirituality and sense of community. Can an intentional cohousing community for elders evolve in such a way that individuals, previously unknown to each other, handle the challenges of living in community and willingly help their neighbors? Whether ESC succeeds, what we discover from the evolution of this pioneering community may affect the lives and choices of many elders in the future. Will ESC be "one-of-a-kind" or the birth of a new movement that offers dignity, respect, and an element of spirituality through mutual support for elders who proactively preplan and take action? There are many questions and few answers. Sharing the experiences and lessons learned from ESC may help others avoid possible pitfalls and obstacles and facilitate this movement of elder intentional communities.

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