

USA Shared Housing-Niche to Mainstream

By Kirby Dunn, HomeShare Vermont

I don't want to burst anyone's bubble, but homesharing programs in the United States aren't mainstream, and I am not sure they will ever be. While the aging of the population and the constant growth of an affordability crisis in housing seems like the perfect storm to make homesharing a solution to all the world's ills, the reality is that homesharing is **not** the first choice for housing for most Americans.

In fact, we have seen a substantial reduction in the number of programs nationwide. In 1986 there were 169 distinct homesharing programs across the country. In 2012 there were only 35 homesharing programs. The good news is that we appear to be on an uptick for new programs in the US. In 2015 there are now 43.

Look at US map of programs that have succeeded over many years and you will see they are in place where housing costs are high mainly on the on east and west coasts. What this tells us is that one the first components of determining a successful program is **location**. That location must be in a place with a housing shortage and high cost. For people to want to share someone else's home, we need an incentive, and that incentive is not just to help someone else, it's the necessity of needing an affordable place to live.

In our state of Vermont we know that we have four times as many people looking for homes in the "urban" part of our service area than in the rural area. The urban area is where costs are the highest and where people want to live. In the rural areas, we have just the opposite- lots of homes, and people with high needs, but very few people who want to live there AND pay the cost in terms of time of money.

How to get from Niche to Mainstream:

- New programs need a long lead time to develop successful matches, market the program and develop a large enough pool of both home seekers and home providers. Think 5 year start-up.
- We are only as strong as our weakest link. In our self-interest we must make a concerted effort at regional, state & national coordination and program improvement.
- "matchmaking" is a very specific skill that not everyone does well and programs need a process that encourages good matchmaking.
- We must constantly focus on marketing and branding. We must be willing to change and improve what we do and how we do it.
- We need to replicate successful programs and not reinvent them.
- We need to standardize data collection and reporting of outcomes to make our case to donors and governments.

In November 2012 a National Symposium on Shared Housing was held in Los Angeles, California sponsored by Affordable Living for the Aging (ALA). At the symposium they released a comprehensive report on best practices, challenges and recommendations for shared housing.

The report “Strategies for Scaling Shared Housing” highlighted ten critical components which homesharing programs should include:

- Screening Process
- Written Homeshare Agreements
- Trial Periods Preceding a Match
- Ongoing Monitoring
- Adequate Staffing Levels
- Data Collection
- Risk Management
- Fair Housing Compliance
- Complementary Alliances, and
- Volunteer Support

The report goes on to note that the **most important element** for success is an intensive screening process.

While homesharing not for everyone, it is an effective strategy and should be available as a choice for those wanting to stay in their homes or for others needing an affordable place to live.

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