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Sharing a space: Northcoast Homeshare provides alternate way to meet community housing needs

Northcoast Homeshare provides alternate way to meet community housing needs



Northcoast Homeshare Program Coordinator Julie Andre, left, and Meghan Gallagher, Area 1 Agency on Aging Information and Assistance Program manager, stand in front of the A1AA office in Eureka. (Heather Shelton — The Times-Standard)

By **HEATHER SHELTON** | hshelton@times-standard.com | Times-Standard



The Area 1 Agency on Aging's Northcoast Homeshare program has completed five local home-sharing matches so far this year.

"Home-sharing is a simple idea where two or more people share a home for their mutual benefit," said Meghan Gallagher, A1AA Information and Assistance Program manager. Gallagher oversees the program, which is coordinated by Julie Andre.

"A person offers a private bedroom and shared common space in exchange for rent or reduced rent and help around the home," Gallagher said in an email interview with the Times-Standard. The program's goal is to help provide security for older adults willing to rent a room in their home while helping other older adults secure safe and affordable housing."

Although the program's primary target is those 50 and older who are at risk of losing their current housing due to health, safety or financial issues, Northcoast Homeshare has no age restrictions, and is open to anybody currently living or wanting to relocate in Humboldt or Del Norte counties who meets the program requirements. Participants to date have ranged in age from 33 to 90.

"Housing is one of the most basic human needs," Gallagher said. "Without a safe place to shelter and sleep, it is difficult for anyone to maintain their health, employment or healthy relationships. At the same time, lower-income older adults who do not own a home struggle to find affordable, safe and accessible housing. With people living alone well into their 80s and even 90s, there is an opportunity to turn underutilized rooms in their homes into housing for other older adults."

Oscar Leatherman, 66, first learned of Northcoast Homeshare in late May/early June. He needed to move from where he was living into a safe and secure home for him and his small dog. His application process moved along swiftly and, by mid-June, Leatherman was able to move into a spacious room in a local home.

"It's been more than a happy experience," he said. "It was a mind-blowing trip that it would happen so fast. ... The Area 1 Agency and Julie really went to work on this to get all this stuff to happen."

Initially, the local home-share program was quite different than today, with the Area 1 Agency on Aging just providing information regarding home-sharing and then



“The first few months, (the program) was operating with basically no budget, just a small fundraising amount,” Gallagher said. “In January 2020, we won \$15,000 from St. Joseph Health’s Care for the Poor Grant. This funding is what allowed us to hire Julie Andre, our (part-time) program coordinator.”

The Northcoast Homeshare application process begins with filling out an application. This is followed up with background and reference checks, interviews and an inspection of the rental space, with follow-ups done after a match is completed.

“Each applicant must supply three personal references. Additionally, guests must provide their current and previous landlord reference,” said Gallagher. “We also have a personal interview with each person. On average, we are on the phone for 15-plus minutes with each reference and the personal interview usually takes 60 to 90 minutes. Once we have a potential match, we run background checks on both parties. After a match, we provide ongoing support/mediation if problems arise.”

The Northcoast Homeshare program has seen a few changes since the COVID-19 health crisis began.

“Pre-COVID, we conducted all personal interviews and match introductions in person. We would always do the host interviews in the person’s home and tour the entire house,” Gallagher said. “Post-COVID, we are conducting as many interviews as possible virtually. If the homeowner is tech-savvy enough, we ask that they take pictures of their space and send them to us rather than us going into the home.

“Pre-COVID,” she said, “we would always drive the guest to the host’s house for the match introduction so we weren’t actually giving out an address. Post-COVID, we are giving out the address, with the approval of the homeowner and having the guest meet us at the house. The meeting is being held outside in the yard with all parties maintaining six-foot distance and wearing masks. Staff are waiting outside when the guest goes inside to tour the house.”

Gallagher says the one-year goal of Northcoast Homeshare is to make 10 matches and then increase that goal by 10 matches annually — so 20 matches in year two, 30 in year three, etc. There are also plans to continue growing the program in Humboldt County and expand into Del Norte County.



“Many of our current programs are made possible due to volunteers and we’ve mimicked this model for our home-share program as well,” Gallagher said. “Utilizing volunteers will allow us to keep the program operating on a minimal budget.”

She added: “We hope that once we have a year or two of data under our belts we can present this information to city/county governments to gain some local funding. Additionally, we are hoping that we could gain some level of support from HSU/CR to expand the program and also focus on assisting students in finding housing.”

For more information about Northcoast Homeshare, call 707-442-3763, ext. 209, or go to <http://www.a1aa.org/homesharing>

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