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Smooth moves

Move-in coordinators answer questions, ease the mind

Can you take your pet, your piano, your potted palm? Leaving your home and moving into a retirement community can be extremely difficult, just from a logistical point of view. Myriad questions need answering, in addition to learning to maneuver a new environment. Step in the move-in coordinator. This helper is tasked with assisting in making the move seamless, easing residents into a new life, as well as fostering the happily ever after.

The helpers

Bonnie Cummings, director of sales and move-in coordinator, is the up-front face at Smith Crossing, a 32-acre continuing care retirement community in Orland Park.

"I work with future residents from their first get-acquainted meeting and tour until every work of art is hung in their apartment or villa," Cummings says. "Of course, I am there to help them on move-in day too."

Cummings helps residents — and their families — understand the services and benefits of CCRCs, which provide independent living, assisted living, memory support and skilled nursing care. She aids them in selecting the type of apartment home or villa best suited to their needs and guides them through the financial approval process.

Cummings' counterpart, Beth Brennan, a move-in coordinator at the Smith Village community in Chicago's Beverly neighborhood, sees herself as a facilitator, easing each person on the path to "worry-free" living.

"I ensure that the move-in process is as simple and stress free as possible," says Brennan. "I work very closely with every future resident and do my best to cater to their individual needs and concerns."

In addition to referring residents to reliable sources for home appraisals, moving, staging homes for sale, space planning in the new residence, painting, etc., Brennan refers people for a medical assessment. "This is completed at Smith Village prior to their moving in for the purpose of the resident's safety and well being," she adds.

Taking the time to personally assess each individual's needs is key to a successful transition, agrees Elizabeth

Oling, director of community relations as Sunrise Assisted Living of Naperville North. "In order to encourage a smooth transition, we focus on learning as much as we can about each new resident before they move into the community," says Oling. "This information not only helps prepare our team to serve the residents, but we are able to identify current residents with similar interests so they may help welcome the newcomers."

All three communities offer move-in coordination services free of charge.

The life changers

Virginia Bailie thought she and her husband George would live in their Palos Heights condominium forever. But a bout with illness made the immediate trump forever.

"My husband had some serious surgery. I was the caregiver and it was difficult," says Virginia Bailie. "We thought the time had come where we needed more help and we didn't want to burden our children."

The Bailses chose Smith Crossing three years ago for, "Oh, so many reasons," says Virginia. They thought the campus was beautiful and it was close to their old neighborhood, convenient to the stores they knew and the doctors they trusted. From the beginning, it was Bonnie Cummings who was right there to answer questions and assist in any way.

"When we met Bonnie she was so open and so willing to explain everything," says Virginia. "You're not just changing your home; you're changing your way of life. You have a million questions at a time like that."

Not only did Cummings answer their questions, she offered advice and helpful information.

"She gave us names of reliable movers. She suggested things we should bring with us — what kitchen supplies, furniture. We did so well with Bonnie's advice we came with just one extra lamp, which they incorporated into the décor here and put in the hall. Now I see my lamp when I walk by."

What the Bailses found particularly helpful was the floor plan they were given with miniature cutouts of furniture to give them an idea of what to bring and what to dispose of.

Although they did bring many treasures to decorate their 1,568-foot



Move-in coordinator Bonnie Cummings helps Smith Crossings resident Virginia Bailie decorate her new home.

"Grand" unit, they also gave a lot away. "We filled our van from stem to stern seven different times and took it to our church for their rummage sale," says Virginia.

Virginia gives two pieces of advice for those contemplating a similar move: Use it or lose it. "I don't even keep a scrap of paper now if I don't need it," she says with a laugh. And, don't wait too long to make the decision to move into a retirement community. "The older you get the harder it is to do this," she adds.

At 90 years of age, Marguerite McGuire, echoes Virginia Bailie. "Making a move like this can be overwhelming. Don't wait," says McGuire. "The younger you are and the more energy you have, the better it is to do it."

McGuire and her family worked with Beth Brennan to make the transition into Smith Village a year ago. "Beth is a darling girl who had all sorts of helpful hints, ways to prepare ahead of time," says McGuire. "And my daughter, who is a lawyer, conferred with her on all the business and legal details."

McGuire stayed in her large home in Beverly as long as she could, but finally realized "it was foolish to stay alone in a big house any longer," she says.

Her favorite aspect of her new life is that she no longer has to cook. "I love the informal breakfast hour; you move around, you talk to people," she says. "I really thought I'd eat breakfast by myself with my newspaper, but I haven't done that yet."

Aid and comfort

It's uncertainty and indecision about making a major move that creates challenges — and rewards — for a move-in coordinator.

"Prior to her move to Smith Village, Marguerite McGuire and I spent a lot of time talking on the phone," relates

Brennan. "Marguerite and her family were excited about her moving in, but Marguerite wasn't sure about the actual moving. We reviewed her floor plan and discussed donating items she no longer needed and she even met with an interior designer about putting the final touches on her unit."

Brennan gave Marguerite the assurance she needed. "To this day, I hear Marguerite say the only regret she has is that she didn't move in sooner!" Brennan says. "Her beaming smile as she walks down the hall and her busy social schedule are proof she made the right decision. Helping people to make the move to Smith Village has been a great experience for me."

As evidenced by McGuire and the Bailses, downsizing is a major concern when contemplating this life change. "Almost every potential resident I meet talks about their worries about downsizing and selling their home," says Cummings. "Many of our current residents still talk about how much they appreciate my introductions to experts who know how to get a home ready for sale at the best price and to tackle the challenge of downsizing."

All three coordinators say another concern they often hear centers around fitting into a new environment. Activities and events are designed to help ease that transition.

"After a resident moves in, our team introduces them to other residents who share their common interests during meals and activities to help them develop new friendships," says Oling.

Taking that leap, with the help of a move-in coordinator, can have great rewards.

"Move-in coordination offers peace of mind to a potential resident," says Brennan. "The move-in coordinator is here to support them and assist with whatever is needed as well as to give assurance that this move is a natural step to their future." ■