

Senior Issues: What Exactly IS “Independent Living”?

by Arnie Snyder

“Many a small thing has been made large by the right kind of advertising.” – Mark Twain

When you hear the term *independent living*, what’s the first idea that comes to mind? A life style choice; an assessment of physical and mental capability; a housing category?

More than likely, one word association that will pop into your head is “old,” or something like it. If you thought, “senior housing,” give credit to the retirement housing industry for its ability to alter the meaning of words through extensive advertising.

In its best sense, *independent living* opens up a world of possibility and freedom. At worst, it is no more than a hopeful fantasy about aging or a company’s sales strategy. For a practical, commercial-free understanding, let’s take a brief tour of several common uses of this expression.

Independent living has its roots in the Disability Rights movement which began in the early 1970s. This was a quest to be identified not by one’s disability, but by one’s citizenship and rights, just like everyone else. One goal was to get disabled persons out of institutions and living within the community. Disabled persons were, as much as possible, empowered for *independent living*.

A parallel movement has taken place among the aged. Consider, for example, the Program of All-Inclusive Care for the Elderly (PACE). Established in 1990, this federal program is designed to keep elderly out of the institutional environment of nursing homes, where practical. The older person lives in his or her own residence, with in-home assistance or day-time care at a central location, all at less expense than a nursing home.

Today *independent living* is primarily associated with aging, due to two important developments: Growth of the senior demographic, and with it; the burgeoning retirement housing industry. This industry has developed a niche product for every senior’s style and stage of life.

In the senior housing market, Independent Living describes an accommodation for older adults that is *not* an Assisted Living Residence, Rehabilitation Center, or Skilled Nursing Facility. Independent Living is a more apt description than “None of the Above,” and it’s the single largest category of senior housing.

Such nuanced usage creates an amusing irony, apparent from a simple illustration. Are you considered to be *living independently* if you are 30, 40, or 50 years old and don’t require day-to-day assistance to shower, dress, feed, and take care of yourself? No, you’re merely *living*. But if you’re, say, 65 plus? For older people, the expression, *independent living*, may seem to have a built-in age bias.

The subtle change in meaning is akin to the distinction between analog and digital. Until digital technology came along, a watch was a watch; a thermometer was a thermometer; and so on. With newer technology, a unique name was necessary to describe everything that had gone before. So now we have analog watches and analog thermometers. We’ve always had them, of course. We just used simpler names.

For older adults who prefer to remain in a traditional home, it was only a matter of time before their preference would be renamed, *independent living*. Whatever you may call it, the stay-at-home population is a lucrative market, targeted by home health services; in-home care and companion services; medical equipment providers; and more. Where there’s a market niche, there’s got to be a name for it.

No discussion on independent living would be complete without considering the growing Age-in-Place movement. Like the watch and thermometer, this lifestyle isn't exactly new. Now that it has a name, it seems to have acquired an attitude, too.

In more than 50 cities throughout the U.S., older adults are organizing volunteer communities of mutual support, social activity, and educational events, while continuing to live in their traditional homes. Members receive volunteer services as part of their membership; Many are volunteers themselves. Each volunteer contributes to the work according to ability. More than *independent living*; this is *inter-dependent living*. Many such communities are also becoming *inter-generational*, to the benefit of old and young alike. Personally I like the expression, Aging-in-Community, to characterize the reinvention of a tradition with age-old roots.

To wrap up our brief tour, residential accommodations and in-home services of all types are important to help the elderly to live as independently as possible in whatever manner they prefer. It's important to remember that it's the older person's needs that should drive these decisions – *not* an industry marketing strategy.

Finally, here's how *not* to live independently. Don't do it alone. *Independent living* is not about denial, procrastination, or rugged individualism. You need others, and they need you. Choose the balance of independent living and community that's best for your lifestyle, finances, and goals.

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