



AS SEEN IN ISSUE 35

smartLIFE

VIA WILLOW VALLEY

WRITTEN BY W. C. MCCLURE
OPPOSITE PAGE, PHOTO BY WILL MARKS
ADDITIONAL PHOTOS IN THIS FEATURE PROVIDED BY SUBJECT

DOES ANYONE REMEMBER THEIR FIRST INTRODUCTION TO 401K PLANS AND THE IMPORTANCE OF PREPARING FOR RETIREMENT YEARS? Blinking at the colorful charts and their associated numbers, it's a safe bet that most of us didn't give it much thought beyond a vague image of a future free of work. Cruise ships and barbecuing in the back yard may have come to mind, along with a fuzzy image of possible future children all grown up and visiting with their little ones. It was a long way away and too much could happen in between to merit giving it a lot of thought.

Alright, let's fast forward a little bit. Age sixty is here, or on the horizon, and retirement is a far more tangible idea. Maybe it has happened already, or maybe it's just a handful of years away. Either way, the money we've been pulling out of paychecks is resting nicely in our retirement accounts and hopefully we have a few other pots cooking just for good measure. We've probably set up various forms of insurance

to look after us in the event of illness, damage to our home, an accident on the road, or a little something extra to provide for our loved ones should we pass unexpectedly. We've worked hard, and thankfully we can smile while strolling into our future, knowing we've covered every possibility. Except that all of our plans were based on an assumption that we'll continue along with the same health and vigor we enjoyed in our youth. Okay, there's a vague notion in there that we might need care when we're at an advanced age, but that's the worst case scenario that something like long-term care insurance is for. No problem. We'll get some of that, too.

Nobody says to themselves, "When I'm 65, I'm going to have a stroke that will make it difficult for me to look after myself the way I do now." Why would we? When we think of strokes, falls, or other events associated with age, we think just that. Age. Old age. Decidedly not 60's or 70's. Statistics are not on our side in this line of thinking.



FRONT L-R

MICHELE SIPEL
DIRECTOR OF HOME AND COMMUNITY
BASED SERVICES FOR WILLOW VALLEY
COMMUNITIES

TERRI GIVENS
MANAGER OF MARKETING AND SALES
FOR SMARTLIFE VIA WILLOW VALLEY

BACK L-R

MICHELLE BUNNELL
ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT
AND EVENT PLANNER

KEITH KNOWLES
SALES ADVISOR

MEGAN HENDERSON
LIFECARE COORDINATOR

"AFTER AGE 65, AN AMERICAN HAS MORE THAN A 70% CHANCE OF NEEDING HELP WITH THE ACTIVITIES OF DAILY LIVING SUCH AS DRESSING, GROOMING, TRANSFERRING, AND USING THE BATHROOM"
(American Society on Aging, 2010)

The need may not be catastrophic, or even permanent. It can, however, mean that we need to rely on help from others.

"The problem is that most people think they're never going to need help," says Michele Sipel, Director of Home and Community Based Services at Willow Valley Communities. "Look at the statistics. They're huge. **70% OF PEOPLE OVER THE AGE OF 65 WILL NEED HELP.** That's not 75, it's 65. 65 is young. But that's when people start needing care, not when they're 85 and 90. People don't want to think about those things. They want to think that nothing will ever happen to them."

For more than 30 years, Willow Valley has provided seniors with forward-thinking communities that embrace health and an independent lifestyle in addition to offering Lifecare services. Fitness and aquatic centers, travel adventures around the world, bowling, and day spa features make these communities sound like high-end resorts, and maybe the best parts of summer camp. Who wouldn't want to move in?

"STATISTICS SHOW THAT 90% OF PEOPLE WHO ARE AGE- AND INCOME-QUALIFIED TO MOVE TO A SENIOR LIVING COMMUNITY DON'T WANT TO," SAYS SIPEL.

Those choosing to stay in their homes, though, often find themselves on the more difficult path when a need arises. Family and friends are called upon to advocate, assist, and



even adopt caretaker roles, often without the training required to navigate the waters of senior healthcare. Must it be one or the other? That is exactly the question which inspired the research and decision to start SmartLife VIA Willow Valley.

"Willow Valley Communities is the only 100% Lifecare senior living provider in Lancaster County," says Sipel. "Lifecare is essentially guaranteed care for life, no matter what level of care you need. If you're residing at Willow Valley in your independent living apartment and you need to be in personal care or you need to be in skilled nursing care, it's all covered for you without an increase to your monthly fee. Your price does not change just because you need care. You pay the same monthly fee in independent living as you do in skilled nursing care."

"Lifecare at Home programs, or retirement communities without walls as they are sometimes called, is not a new concept," says Terri Givens, Manager of Marketing and Sales for SmartLife VIA Willow Valley. SmartLife is only the



third of its kind in Pennsylvania. Currently there are 20 Lifecare at Home programs across the country and more are sprouting up each year. What Willow Valley sets out to accomplish is straight-forward. For seniors aged 60 and older, they see that a plan is needed to allow aging seniors the dignity and support system necessary to take the burden off of family and friends.

“What sets SmartLife VIA Willow Valley apart from a lot of the long-term care insurance policies is the Lifecare Coordinator,” says Givens. “The Lifecare Coordinator is the heart and soul of this program and will be invaluable to you. As a SmartLife Member, you will get to know your Lifecare Coordinator and develop a relationship with a professional who will be available to you 24/7, will be your advocate, will give you support to guide you through that crazy long-term care maze, will set up care services for you when you need them, and will make sure you’re living well and independently in your home.”

Imagine that, instead of scouring the phone book or internet for the 1-800-line to get the help you need, you have one phone number to call with a Lifecare Coordinator who knows you and your situation. The same contact can easily set up a ride to a medically necessary outpatient procedure, coordinate meals during a short-term illness, bring in home care aides or homemakers and companion services, or even coordinate and arrange for personal care or skilled nursing care at Willow Valley Communities if staying at home ever becomes unsafe. Imagine knowing in advance and being able to plan for what that portion of your life, with all of its question marks, will cost.

What a plan like this doesn’t need, Willow Valley has decided, is to impose waiting periods before coverage kicks in or put limits on the length of coverage or amount of money that can be paid out. It shouldn’t require a person’s assets to be below a certain level in order to qualify for assistance, or insist that at least two Activities of Daily Living (ADLs) be affected before services begin. ADLs include things like walking, eating, dressing, and bathing. Not being able to do any one of those for any period of time, without help, can put a pinch on quality of living.

Lifecare Coordinators are well and good, but what would really set this plan apart would be adding community and healthy activities to help encourage proactive health and socialization for a better quality of life. Just because someone wants to remain in their home doesn’t mean they should be isolated. A good sense of community is a smart part of any health plan. Any ideas?

You bet! “One of the other really fabulous things about SmartLife,” says Givens, “is that while you’re well and independent in your home, you have access to Willow Valley Communities to socialize and participate in activities and events at the new Club House and also at the Cultural Center. As a SmartLife Member, you can go to lunch and learn events and theater events. You can go on trips. You can make use of the new restaurant at The Club House called



the Local Table, which is farm to table dining. You can use the new six-lane bowling alley. You can play pickleball, tennis, or badminton. It’s really a fantastic opportunity because the only people who have access to these amenities are the residents at Willow Valley and the SmartLife Members.”

That’s a big wish list for one plan, but they managed it. Lancaster County residents are eligible to apply for SmartLife, a plan regulated by the Pennsylvania Department of Insurance, where members benefit from the continuum of care while staying in their home. Members pay a one-time membership fee that’s based upon age at time of enrollment, with eligibility starting at age 60 and no maximum age. You have to be living independently, complete the application process, and you need to maintain medical insurance coverage. Predictable monthly payments will carry the plan forward, and members are covered from their first day of membership to the end of their lives. No waiting period and no time-out or maximum amount that the plan will pay out. If you have a need, it’s covered. Oh, and those payments can be claimed at tax time.



Why isn't this a standard consideration in retirement planning? First, SmartLife VIA Willow Valley only opened their doors a year ago, and are not yet well understood. Second, a lot of people hear "Lifecare" and tune out, thinking that one plan is equal to the next or assume that their existing long-term insurance policy and government programs will see to all of their needs. Perhaps they will. On the other hand, what happens if they don't?

"We are working on trying to get out and educate," says Sipel, "and to get people to understand what our program is about. The ultimate goal is to keep people independent and well in their homes. They want to stay in the home they've been in for 50 years that their grandkids come to every summer. We want to help make that possible. If they don't need help, that's great, but if they do there's a plan already in place."

The initial investment for a 70-year-old individual ranges from \$20,000-\$45,000 with an ongoing monthly payment of around \$500. This seems like a lot of money until we start comparing costs side-by-side with private pay rates for care. Let's say that Home Care costs about \$22 per hour today. Then let's assume that we'll only pay that for 28 hours a week. Okay, not terrible; we're looking at just over \$32,000 per year. Insurance doesn't cover Home Care, but we've been saving up to protect ourselves in the event of something like that.

Personal Care might look a little more like \$120 per day, coming to over \$43,800 per year. Nope, not running yet. Though if need for these services extends longer than a year, that initial deposit to SmartLife VIA Willow Valley does start looking more attractive. What if we get into the territory of

Nursing Home Care, in the average range of \$320 per day? That comes out at nearly \$117,000 per year.

ACCORDING TO LONGTERMCARE.GOV, THE AVERAGE LENGTH OF STAY IN A SKILLED NURSING FACILITY FOR WOMEN IS 3.7 YEARS AND 2.2 YEARS FOR MEN, AND 20% OF PEOPLE WILL NEED OVER FIVE YEARS OF CARE.

How much does our current long-term insurance plan cover again? And for how long?

"When people say, 'Oh, we have enough money in the bank. We can self-insure,' I ask, 'Do you want to spend your money that way?' I can think of a lot things to do with the \$117,000 dollars that would pay for Skilled Nursing Care," Sipel says. "That could pay for a really nice trip," she adds with a laugh.

Then we have statistics coming out that say things like:

"BETWEEN 2002 AND 2012 THE PRICE FOR A SEMI-PRIVATE ROOM IN SKILLED NURSING CARE INCREASED 4.5% PER YEAR"

(Congressional Budget Office, 2013)

Good thing we'll never need to worry about any of this since old age isn't going to touch us.

"At the end of the day, members are truly protecting themselves and their assets with Smart Life," says Givens.

"Yes," Sipel agrees. "They know what their costs are going to be. \$500 a month is a much better price than paying \$10-11,000 per month for skilled nursing care. Would

you rather pay \$500 or \$11,000? That's an easy answer for most people."

We study the colorful charts and graphs and tuck money away each paycheck to save up toward the unknowns of retirement. We cover potential risks with insurance for our cars, our day-to-day health, our homes, and even the costs that could burden our loved ones when we pass away. We work hard, try to make good investment decisions, and save what we can so that in our future, when free of work, we can enjoy the fruits of our labors. We can enjoy time with our loved ones. We get to enjoy the rest of our days. A complete plan ought to include a good hard look at the burdens which could be placed on our loved ones (and our bank accounts) by the rising costs of age-related needs.

Until science catches up with science fiction, aging is a certainty that we're handed at birth. Age-related difficulties, and the needs surrounding them, are the question mark to which SmartLife VIA Willow Valley has offered up an answer.

"The goal of this program is to keep people independent and well in their homes, and that's our focus," says Sipel. "Along the way, we're protecting their assets. We're also helping to coordinate care for them, so it does take that burden off the children. They can just be children. They can be a support to their family and not have to be caregiver. They don't have to be the person to figure out where to get the next person coming in to watch Mom or make sure Mom's okay."

SMARTLIFE VIA WILLOW VALLEY
1576 LITITZ PIKE
LANCASTER, PA 17601
(717) 299-5673
WWW.SMARTLIFEWV.ORG

