

## THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK

## Communal living in a pandemic: It's safe and it's working

Janet Eastman *The Oregonian/OregonLive*

Singles, couples, families and friends are huddling in dwellings of all configurations to reduce the spread of the coronavirus. One rare but growing type of housing arrangement had a head start: Communities designed to accommodate people working at home, tag-team shopping and coordinating efforts to benefit all.

Unlike apartments, condos or other multi-resident set ups, people living in collaborative "co-housing" or "co-living" spaces buy a unit or sign a lease knowing they will interact often with their neighbors.

There are community meals, common living and dining areas, garden work parties and meetings where the residents make decisions by consensus.

People have their own home in co-housing communities, while co-living residents have a bedroom in a large house and someone shops for the group, someone pays the utilities bills and someone else takes out the trash. Toilet paper is automatically ordered online, and bulk buying to keep prices low also means pantries were already full when supermarket shelves emptied out early on in the pandemic.

Jay Standish can't remember the last time he went to a grocery store, even before a deadly disease was released upon the world.

He's a resident of a big house in which tenants share meals and duties, and he's also co-founder, with Ben Provan, of OpenDoor, a communal living management company with housing in Portland, Berkeley, Oakland and San Francisco.

"We are good quarantiners," Standish said. "People who live in community have dinner together every night, socialize and keep each other sane. My friends alone in a studio apartment are having a rough time at this."

Precautionary protocols were adapted quickly when COVID-19 hit.

Romantic partners who didn't live in the house had to decide whether they were staying or going; there could be no back and forth. Guests are no longer invited to one of the festive family-style meals.

Prospective renters have to watch a virtual tour and be interviewed via teleconferencing. New residents are asked to self-isolate for a while before joining the group at the dining table.

"We ask for physical distancing, not necessarily social distancing," said Standish.

As in any household, hands are washed often, surfaces are sanitized and

cleaning chores have been stepped up.

Following house rules to benefit everyone is embedded in the culture of co-living.

"We figured it out a long time ago how a bunch of folks can peacefully live together in a house," Standish said.

**MODERN COMMUNES**

In the 1960s, counterculture communes sprang up in Oregon and around the world. Today, collaborative housing options are appealing because they're affordable, typically 20% to 30% less than the cost of a studio apartment, said Standish and other co-living experts.

At The Village in Northeast Portland's Boise neighborhood, residents in the four-house community pay \$850 to \$1,150 a month for rent, depending on the room size and amenities. At The Forge, a remodeled eight-bedroom house in Northeast Portland's Montavilla neighborhood, residents pay \$750 to \$925 a month, and the newly opened The Grove in the Cully neighborhood has 22 units, priced from \$680 to \$950.

At The Grove, residents in the two, two-story houses and two smaller dwelling units share the large, fully stocked kitchen, dining room, living room and laundry room. There is also an open courtyard with a small grove of old cedars.

This community is more than half full. Residents also pay about \$150 a month for groceries to support the group meals, and kitchens are fully equipped, including luxuries like Vita-mix blenders and espresso machines. Utilities and cleaning is another \$100 a month.

People can create formal or informal agreements about sharing a car, kayak or other possessions.

"It's more of a sharing and less of a consuming lifestyle," Standish said.

Residents also share interests, from art to gardening, and are dedicated to meeting people halfway.

"The household is built around a kitchen and food system, and people are choosing that as a lifestyle," said Standish, whose management company offers workshops on how to conduct successful house meetings, practice empathic communication and divvy up chores.

Managers of co-living properties work hard to erase the stereotype that there's a frat house party culture or a crunchy-granola point of view.

New or remodeled housing is designed to attract a large group of believers and converts.

**SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL BENEFITS**

Cooperative housing has long been credited with its environmental advantages as more people live in a household, reducing the carbon footprint.

But advocates point out that community-oriented housing also delivers social and emotional benefits, especially to those who would otherwise feel lonely and unsupported during the coronavirus crisis and the crashing economy.

"Living in community supports resilience," said Eli Spevak, who lives at Cully Grove, a 16-unit co-housing community in Northeast Portland that his company, Orange Spot, co-developed with Zach Parrish in 2012.

"It also helps to live with people who have a wide range of skill sets, a nice level of trust and the ability to team up on group tasks," he said, adding these are "all handy things in case of catastrophe, whether that be earthquake, massive power outage or pandemic."

Residents of the two-acre Cully Grove have a community building with a kitchen, onsite well and gardens in which they grow food.

Also in place is an organizational structure and active email list that can quickly translate ideas into tangible community activities, said Spevak.

At 7 p.m. each night, residents gather at their front porches to celebrate health-care workers with cheers, claps and drumming. They were also part of a team that sewed 100 personal protective outfits made of Tyvek polyethylene for Virginia Garcia Memorial Health Center's drive-thru COVID-19 testing program.

Kids continue to play outside, but they aren't sharing sports equipment. Playground swings and a trampoline were removed initially from action, but they are "now coming back into use as some households with kids 'bubble up' for outdoor fun," said Spevak.

He adds that spending too much time cooped up with immediate family can be overwhelming.

"Living in community

provides opportunities to interact socially with neighbors from a safe distance," he said.

The community also gathers outdoors at a safe distance on movie nights to watch "The Princess Bride" or "Monty Python and the Holy Grail." Over the Fourth of July weekend, they saw "Hamilton" together in the outdoor courtyard.

Instead of indoor potluck dinners, residents are starting to hold Friday picnics, where everyone brings their own food.

Through his development company, Spevak said he's creating old-fashioned neighborhoods in a new-fashioned way.

Sandy Haffey and Michael Morrissey are moving into Cully Grove on July 18, the day the sale closes on their house in Northeast Portland's Alameda neighborhood where they lived for 20 years and raised their children.

The couple, in their 70s, say at Cully Grove they found a place that offers community and closeness, congeniality and privacy, and a smart, reasonable place to age-in-place while

also being part of a multi-generational neighborhood.

"Getting me to move is like turning the Queen Mary around in Johnson Creek," Morrissey jokes. "Sandy is more social but Cully Grove has just enough and not too many people, and is a little lighter on endless committees."

Morrissey also likes that Cully Grove "is like a Garden of Eden." Their new house is surrounded by a private yard and Haffey has already transplanted tomato plants to the 11-foot raised vegetable bed she uses on the two-acre property.

"I go over there to check on them and there's always someone in the garden to engage with from a safe distance," she said. On one visit, Haffey, a Portland native, reunited with a long-lost friend she didn't know lived there.

"Overall, I guess the main thing about living in community is that sheltering in place can be kind of fun," Spevak said. "People support one another as challenges arise. We have our privacy, but don't feel lonely."

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