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HEALTH

Aging at home in a pandemic

COVID-19 outbreaks in long-term care facilities have prompted some to receive care from family instead



Cheri Tatar, left, gets assistance from her wife, Amber Mandley, going up the stairs at their Irving Park home. (Brian Cassella/Chicago Tribune)

BY LAUREN LEAZENBY

This year threw Amber Mandley an extra curveball: Her wife, Cheri Tatar, had a stroke in May. Due to hospital COVID-19 protocol, they weren't able to see each other for two months. When it was time for Tatar to leave the hospital, Mandley faced the decision of whether to place her in an assisted-living facility or care for her at home.

COVID-19 has caused many families to reconsider putting loved ones in long-term care facilities, said Chris Holbert, CEO of [SecuraTrac](#), which makes mobile, personal emergency response systems. [Data from the Illinois Department of Public Health](#) shows 86% of deaths from COVID-19 were individuals age 60 and older — [and over half of all COVID-19 deaths](#) in Illinois were in long-term care facilities. Holbert said safety measures in place to prevent these outbreaks have also driven up cost.

Cost was a deciding factor for Mandley, 53, in her decision whether to place Tatar, 59, in a facility for recovery. There was also the prospect that she wouldn't see her wife for even longer, which made it feel like the best option was to bring her home. "I was going to figure it out," she said.

So, Tatar came home. But their bungalow in Irving Park wasn't equipped with the accommodations she needed. The bathtub was too deep, the doorways were of varying widths and the house had several stairways. "You don't plan for a stroke," Mandley said.

Gina Knight, president of [Kastle Keeper](#), helped Mandley renovate on a limited budget — adding grab bars throughout the house, a comfort-height toilet in the bathroom and a ramp to the front door.

Knight is certified by the National Home Builders Association as an aging-in-place specialist. With Kastle Keeper, she outfits seniors' houses to help them age at home comfortably, adding features like walk-in showers, lighted hallways and wider doorways for wheelchair access.

Prior to the pandemic, most older Americans planned to age at home. According to a [2018 AARP survey](#), 76% of respondents age 50 and older want to remain in their homes as they age.

"People want to stay in their homes for the rest of their lives," Knight said. "With COVID, it's put an even further magnification on this."

Mandley said Tatar will recover from her stroke, so a lot of the changes they made to their home will be temporary. But, she said it made her think about the future of aging in her home. "A number of the grab bars are just going to stay up now," she said.

Knight said planning ahead is key. She recommends people start to develop a plan for aging in place at age 50, "because 50 is when things start changing for everyone." For adult children of aging parents, she said they should start talking about this process early.

COVID-19 has prompted these conversations sooner than expected for many families, said John Cushing, a board member of the [Chicagoland chapter of the National Aging in Place Council](#).

He said the pandemic has exposed to adult children just how much care aging parents actually need. They started taking care of their parents at the beginning of the shelter-in-place order, "and now they are realizing their parents are needing a lot more assistance than they ever imagined because they do a great job of hiding it," he said.

Cushing, who also is co-owner of the nonmedical home care agency [Touching Hearts at Home in Elmhurst](#), said to look for cognitive decline in loved ones, as well as a loss of interest in things they would normally do. “Changes in behavior and routine are often a signal that they need to be assessed for how they’re performing their activities of daily life,” he said.

The benefits to aging at home go beyond COVID-19 precautions. The familiarity of home is comforting, especially for those with cognitive impairment, Cushing said, and it minimizes disruption in their lives. “There’s not a loss of independence because they can still sleep in their own bed and do many of the same things they had in the past,” he said.

Technology can help seniors be even more independent, Holbert said. Telemedicine, which has become widespread as a result of COVID-19, can make health care accessible even if seniors can no longer drive.

He also recommends seniors learn to use a smartphone. “Smartphones provide a huge opportunity to improve the likelihood that you’ll age in place safely, but also be well connected,” he said, adding that aging at home can be a lonely experience. “Being alone has an impact on one’s mental health, and mobile phones can cut down on that to a degree.”

Most people will age in their homes going forward, Holbert said. “There’s going to be a huge trend, an increase — we’ve seen it over the past decade — in the rate at which people choose to stay in their own homes,” he said. “Preparing to age in place was something that was required before, but probably more now than ever.”

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