



A Consumer's Guide to Homesharing



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Revised with permission from NSHRC (National Shared Housing Resource Center)

What is Homesharing?

Homesharing is an alternative way for people to meet their housing needs that provides numerous benefits to homeowners and renters alike. In simple terms, homesharing is an arrangement by which two or more unrelated people share a dwelling within which each retains a private space.

A shared arrangement might involve a homeowner and renter, or two or more people renting a house or apartment together. Home seekers can arrange a regular agreement or exchange services for part or all the rent, but no two homesharing situations are alike; each is tailored to the needs and desires of the people involved.

Here are some examples:

Homesharing with Older Peers



Mrs. Warrington is a 72-year-old widow whose husband died two years ago. Her two sons are now grown and have families of their own. On her limited survivor's pension, she can no longer sustain the expense of running her household alone. She's also lonely and frightened - especially at night.

Mrs. Manley, a 68-year-old widow living in an apartment house, is faced with a substantial rent increase. She can no longer afford her apartment, but she wants to remain in her neighborhood. One solution is to move into Mrs. Warrington's three bedroom house. There the two women can exchange favorite recipes, eat together, and share household tasks.

Mrs. Warrington says, "You can't measure all the homesharing benefits in dollars and cents. It's worth an awful lot to get a good night's sleep because there's another person in the house." Mrs. Manley adds, "I'm so happy that I found a companion and good friend, as well as a comfortable place to live."

Intergenerational Homesharing

Mrs. Peterson is 82 years old and has a serious heart condition. She is still very keen and vital, but her family and friends have been concerned about her health and believe she shouldn't live alone.

Mrs. Peterson didn't want to go to a senior home or move in with family and decided to share her home with a graduate student named **Steven**. He needed a quiet place to study and an inexpensive place to live.

Steven agreed to do housework and gardening for Mrs. Peterson in exchange for free rent. Mrs. Peterson says, "It's such a joy to have a young person around. It's not just the help, but the lovely sounds of life that I enjoy hearing in my house once again."

Steven says, "Mrs. Peterson is a real survivor. I admire her a lot. She's given me the opportunity to continue my studies, even though tuition has doubled in one year."



Mr. Franklin has lived alone for many years since his divorce and the emancipation of his children. He is fully employed, but finds it challenging to maintain his home and pay his property taxes on a single income. He likes the spaciousness of his home and enjoys living in his neighborhood, leading to his decision not to downsize his possessions, but rather rent out the finished lower level of his home.

Much to Mr. Franklin's delight, he is now sharing his home with **Jacob**, a 33-year-old architect who found a position in a firm downtown and needed an affordable place to live while saving toward his plans to marry and set up his own home.

While their relationship is friendly, the main benefit each receives in this homesharing match is financial.



As the examples demonstrate, people share their homes for different reasons. Some desire companionship or increased personal safety. Others need to defray or avoid skyrocketing rents, property taxes, or utility and maintenance costs. Many are looking for a combination of these benefits.

You, too, may be living in a house that's too large since your children have grown and moved away. Or you may be a single parent who finds it difficult to cope with all the responsibilities and costs of maintaining a household alone. For these and many other reasons, homesharing may make sense for you.

Is Homesharing for You?

You may think homesharing sounds interesting, but is it for you? Can you successfully share your home or live in somebody else's home?

Shared housing is not for everyone. To answer the questions above, it's helpful to examine past living arrangements. Everyone has a homesharing history because we've all lived with family or friends at some time in our lives. You may want to list on paper all of your homesharing experiences and review them in your mind to evaluate what was good and bad. Ask yourself the following questions:

- ✓ Am I sensitive to other people?
- ✓ Am I "reasonably accepting" of other people's personalities, moods, and preferences?
- ✓ Do I listen to and understand other people, especially when there's a difference of opinion?
- ✓ Am I able to confront problems and find workable solutions?
- ✓ Am I willing to compromise and be flexible?

When people investigate homesharing, they often feel quite ambivalent. Their conflicting feelings may seem burdensome, but are actually helpful in determining what's important in a living situation. **Every person needs to weigh the pros and cons when considering a homesharing arrangement:**

What are the advantages? What are the disadvantages? What do you or don't you have in your present living situation and what would you like for the future?



What's Required to Make Homesharing Work?

Many people are unsure about what kind of person(s) they want to share a home with. But if a shared arrangement is to be successful, it's imperative that potential home seekers clarify their expectations.

If you are thinking about homesharing, try to get to know the other person(s) well enough to decide whether a shared arrangement will work. Making sure you like one another is important, but you should also be certain there's enough common ground on which to begin a homesharing arrangement. This means exploring differences, as well as the things that bring you together. The goal is to make certain that there are no extreme differences that would make living together unwise.

A **mutually agreed upon trial period** is one of the best ways to explore and understand a potential home seeker's expectations. When it is feasible, trial periods can last a weekend, a week, two weeks, or a month. Taking the time to get to know your fellow home seeker(s) is the insurance you need to make a homesharing arrangement work for you.

After you decide to live with someone, be sure to have open, ongoing communication about each of your needs. Many people have difficulty asserting themselves, but the more each person can tell the other(s) what he/she needs and wants, the greater the likelihood that everyone's needs can be met.

No matter how wonderful your housemate is, there will be times you'll disagree. **It's best to set aside certain times of the day or week on a regular basis to meet and talk with each other.** In this way, when conflicts occur, there's a natural forum already established in which you can resolve your differences. These talks will help you confront issues and changes together before they grow into major differences.

A homesharing agreement is more likely to be successful if you choose a housemate with complementary needs, as in the following examples:

- ✓ An older homeowner with a mortgage and extra bedrooms might choose to homeshare with a young couple trying to save money to buy a home.
- ✓ A lonely widow or widower living in a two-bedroom luxury apartment may choose to share her or his apartment with someone recently retired who can no longer afford housing and is looking for companionship.

People living together need to feel that their lives are equally enhanced. When you're exploring a shared arrangement, look for that balance and sense of mutuality.

Finally, if you will be the person sharing your home you need to consider and abide by any occupancy limits in any lease, HOA rules, or Fairfax County Zoning Ordinances for your home.



A Self-Questionnaire for Those Considering Sharing Their Home or Apartment

1. Why do I want to homeshare with someone?
2. Is my home or apartment suitable for sharing? Is there a private room for a housemate and an easily accessible bathroom? Is there adequate closet or storage space? Are there structural barriers, such as stairs, that might limit who can live in my home?
3. Is the space I'm making available really ready for another person and his/her possessions? If not, what must I do to make it ready? Will the space be furnished or unfurnished?
4. If a person needs an unfurnished bedroom, is there extra space in the house to store my things?
5. How much rent do I need to satisfactorily reduce my housing cost burdens?
6. Do I need help around the house? If yes, how much?
7. To what degree do I want to share my kitchen, living room, and other common areas?
8. What household responsibilities (e.g., housework, cooking, shopping, driving, gardening, trash removal, laundry, etc.), do I want to share?
9. What are my housekeeping standards? For example, how do I want the common areas to be kept?
10. Am I willing to provide any services (e.g., cooking, laundry, driving, etc.)?
11. What's essential to me in a housemate?
 - a. Do I prefer a female, male, or couple?
 - b. Do I prefer an employed or retired person, or a student?
 - c. Do I have an age preference?
 - d. Would I consider living with children?
 - e. Do I object to smoking or drinking?
 - f. Would I consider living with pets?
12. What kind of relationship do I want with my housemate? Do I want a casual relationship or a friendly companion with whom to share certain activities and interests?
13. What are my shortcomings that might present difficulties to anyone living with me?
14. What qualities do I have that would contribute to a shared agreement?

A Self-Questionnaire for Those Considering Sharing Someone Else's Home or Apartment

1. Why do I want to homeshare with someone?
2. What kind of neighborhood do I want to live in?
3. Do I need a furnished or unfurnished space?
4. How much rent can I afford?
5. What's essential to me in a housemate?
 - a. Do I prefer a female, male, or couple?
 - b. Do I have an age preference?
 - c. Would I consider living with children?
 - d. Do I need public transportation or parking?
 - e. Do I object to smoking or drinking?
 - f. Would I consider living with pets?
6. What kind of relationship do I want with my housemate? Do I just want to rent a room in a home or do I want a friend and companion with whom to share activities and/or interests?
7. What kind of living space do I need?
8. How much private and common space do I need?
9. What household responsibilities (e.g., housework, cooking, shopping, driving, errands, gardening, trash removal, handiwork, laundry, etc.), do I want to share?
10. What are my housekeeping standards? For example, how clean will I want the common areas to be kept?
11. Am I interested in providing services (e.g., housework, cooking, driving, gardening, etc.), to my housemate for an equitable financial arrangement?
12. Are stairs a problem for me?
13. Do I need assistance from the person(s) with whom I will live?
14. Am I prepared to adjust to a household change in return for rent savings, services, security, or companionship?
15. What are my shortcomings that might present difficulties to anyone living with me?
16. What qualities do I have that would contribute to the success of a shared arrangement?

I've Decided to Homeshare: What's Next

If, after considering these issues, you've decided that homesharing is for you, you'll need to begin searching for a suitable housemate. First, find out if there is a homesharing program in your area. If there is no shared housing program in your community, the initiative for finding a compatible housemate will necessarily rest with you.



How to Advertise for a Home Seeker

The question is: How do you safely go about finding potential home seekers?

For personal safety reasons, you may want to limit access to your name and telephone number. You can either list your home address and telephone number, your work phone number, email address, or a post office box for replies to your notice.

Begin your search by spreading the word amongst your friends and relatives, at churches and synagogues, at work, in senior centers, food co-ops, and clubs or

membership organizations with which you are affiliated. You might print up 3 X 5 cards containing basic information. These notices can be placed on the bulletin boards and in the publications of the organizations mentioned above.

You may also want to consider placing notices at social service agencies, food stores, doctors' offices, libraries, universities, housing services, community centers, social security offices, and in community or city newspapers.

Interviewing a Potential Housemate

When you receive replies to your notice, an initial exploratory phone conversation serves the purpose of screening out prospects that are not what you have in mind. Keep a list of all your questions and preferences by your telephone and use them as a guide for your first conversation.

If after an initial phone conversation you want to explore homesharing possibilities further, arrange to meet the individual(s) in a neutral setting, such as a restaurant or café. There you can further investigate mutual needs and concerns, as well as become acquainted more personally.

If a professional from a homesharing agency is not involved, you should follow up with criminal background and reference checks to determine the appropriateness of the potential housemate.

If this face-to-face meeting is successful and all the references are satisfactory, the next step is to arrange a time to meet again in the home or apartment that will be shared. Home providers may also desire to visit the present home of the person coming to share with them. Such a visit aids in assessing similarities and differences in lifestyle.

In these meetings you may want to **invite a friend or relative to give you an added perspective. Though this process may seem involved, the time and care you take at the beginning can help you avoid later grief and aggravation by finding a compatible person at the outset.**



Roommate
Wanted

After the Interview, What Next?

After you have interviewed a prospective housemate, refer to the following questions to help sort out your impressions and to ensure that all your questions were asked and answered. By focusing these impressions, you should be able to determine whether this person will be a good housemate for you.

Post Interview Questions for Home Providers

1. Did I discuss what is important to me in a homesharing arrangement?
2. Have I asked all the essential questions about the person I am considering? For example, have I discussed service exchange, if any; music preferences; television habits; home entertaining; overnight guests; work, sleep, and wakeup schedules; temperature preferences for summer and winter months; privacy needs; etc.
3. Have I made clear the extent to which I am willing to share the common rooms, the kitchen, and outdoor space?
4. Have we agreed on meal preparation and schedules?
5. Have we agreed about who is responsible for household chores?
6. Have we agreed on the financial arrangements?
7. What do I like most about this potential housemate?
8. Does this potential housemate have similar values and needs?
9. What do I not like about this person or the possibility of sharing with him/her?
10. Can our differences be overcome?
11. Have I checked his/her references or talked with people who have known him/her for several years (e.g., former roommates, landlords, employers, co-workers or neighbors)?
12. Have I offered my personal references to someone I'm considering as a housemate?
13. Have I agreed to a trial period of living together before allowing the home seeker to move in permanently, without implied obligations by either?
14. Have we considered using a **written agreement to specify rights and obligations?**

Post Interview Questions for Home Seekers

1. Will I be happy living in this location/ neighborhood?
2. Is it close to my friends and family?
3. Is it near public transportation, stores, and services?
4. Can I financially afford to live here?
5. Do my preferences fit in with the home provider's preferences?
6. What do I like most (and least) about this home and person(s)?
7. Can any of these things be changed or overcome to suit me?
8. Did I discuss what is important to me and ask all my essential questions about the person I am considering? For example, have I discussed service exchanges, if any; music preferences; television habits; home entertaining; overnight guests; work, sleep, and wake-up schedules; temperature preferences for summer and winter months; privacy needs; kitchen and/or laundry privileges; etc.
9. Will we cook together, share the house's common spaces, daily activities, and companionship, or would I be happier living a life relatively separate from my home provider(s)?
10. Have we talked frankly about my rights to household areas and my obligations to the house and the homeowner? Have we clearly agreed to a trial visit, if possible, before I move most of my possessions - a period of at least a week without any implied obligations on either part?

A Homesharing Agreement

If after the interviews you have mutually agreed to be homemates, you are strongly encouraged to sign a formal agreement addressing rental payment terms, establishing each person's obligations to the care of the shared home, and stating any other obligations or arrangements between the homemates.



List of Discussion Points for Potential Home Seekers

Sharing Tasks, Space, and Things

- What areas of the home will be shared and what areas will be private?
- Who is responsible for household tasks?
- Cleanliness standards for ALL rooms in the house?
- Furnishings?
- Personal possessions (television, stereo, cookware, dishes, linens, tools, etc.)?
- Laundry?
- Storage space?

Money

- What is the rent; when is it due?
- If there is a service exchange, what is the financial arrangement and what are the services?
- Utilities included in the rent?
- Buy food together?

Habits and Preferences

- Daily life (work, sleep, wake-up, and bathroom schedules)?
- Temperature preferences for summer and winter?
- Smoking?
- Pets?
- Noise level?
- Alcohol use?
- Television habits?
- Music preferences?
- Telephone habits?
- Home entertaining (overnight guests, visitors/friends)?

Meals

- Eat together or not; schedule?
- Shopping and preparation of meals?
- Kitchen privileges?
- Use of refrigerator, freezer, and pantry, and kitchen storage space?
- Food preferences?
- Special diet?

Getting Along

- What are our needs for socializing and privacy?
- Are there any activities we would like to share?
- How will we handle changing needs?

Medical Considerations

- Medical conditions other home seeker(s) should know about?
- Medications?
- Exchange doctors' telephone numbers?
- What arrangements will be made in the event of injury or illness?

Emergency Contacts

- Number(s) to call in case of emergency?

Beginning and Ending

- How long is homesharing agreement to last?
- Trial visits?
- How much notice is needed to terminate the homesharing agreement?
- What other arrangements?

Getting Along

While there are many benefits to homesharing, disagreements can certainly arise. We have all experienced conflicts at some time with family, friends, or housemates. Dealing with differences does not have to be a negative experience; in fact, it can be a growing and uplifting experience. Here are a few suggestions to successfully deal with small problems before they grow into BIG ones.

- ✓ Express clearly the problems as you see them, how you feel, and what you'd like to have done to change the situation.
- ✓ Discuss one issue at a time without being defensive.
- ✓ Make sure you agree on the definition of the problem.
- ✓ Listen carefully to what the other person is saying, thinking and feeling about the problem.
- ✓ Discuss the possible solutions. What are the good points about each? Who will do what and when?
- ✓ Choose a plan with which you are both comfortable.
- ✓ Decide how you will implement the plan. What are the steps? Who will do what and when?
- ✓ Decide on a time to discuss progress.
- ✓ Recognize what you've both accomplished in working out the situation.
- ✓ If matched by a homesharing agency, communicate your need for help in dealing with the issue.

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A publication of Fairfax County, Va. Updated Jan. 2019. To request
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