

“Orphan Elders” - Is Aging in Place Always the Best Option?

“Orphan Elders” is the term used to describe seniors who are aging alone - without a network of family and friends. They are single or widowed, have no children, or none with whom they have a regular and supportive relationship, and no support system. Because of health or financial reasons, they may be isolated socially.

Most seniors want to “age in place.” Home is familiar and comfortable. Change is frightening, as is the thought of “institutionalization” and the financial drain it brings. But aging in place can be dangerous, especially for vulnerable orphan elders who rarely, if ever, leave their homes. In a suburban area, with little or no convenient transportation, home can become a prison for those who are no longer capable of driving and may even have difficulty walking unassisted. While aging in place engenders a sense of control, that control is illusive at best. It necessitates a variety of essential services which, in turn, require financing and a support team with the flexibility to manage many ever-changing responsibilities. A strong correlation exists between social isolation and diminished physical or mental health.

What adds to the complexity of the situation is that the progression into ‘orphanhood’ is typically not sudden and it is often unforeseen. An individual who was once healthy, vibrant, active and hard-working may, over the course of time, lose their spouse, close friends and acquaintances as the result of illness, accident or age. People who were once “defined” by their jobs or careers are isolated by retirement and their business associates and acquaintances become remote. The activities that once filled their time can no longer be performed and, if there are no family members, children or others with whom they maintain a *regular* and close relationship, they are at risk. Although they may want to remain in their own homes, it is important to recognize and acknowledge that alternatives to aging in place may ultimately be most beneficial.

If you or someone you know is or may be an orphan elder and you want to present alternatives to aging in place and the associated risks, call Berwitz & DiTata LLP for an appointment.