

Home audits help seniors stay in their own homes

by Suzanne Pollak
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The adage “you are only as old as you feel” goes only so far. All too often, your mind says you are young enough to keep carrying those packages up the stairs and preparing the seder for the ever-growing extended family.

Sometimes your body doesn't always cooperate, and there comes a point in the lives of many people when normal day-to-day responsibilities become overwhelming.

But before you start packing your bags and moving into an assisted living facility, you might want to call the Jewish Social Service Agency.

With the goals of promoting independence and keeping seniors in their own homes, this organization has a myriad of services to help people age gracefully and provide peace of mind for the entire family.

“We do consults. We make sure they [seniors] have the services they need,” said Cheryl Weisel, a licensed clinical social worker.

Weisel will go to a person's home and basically case the joint. Is the lighting good enough? And not just bright enough, but are there some lights on during the night in case the person needs to get out of bed?

Are there grab bars in the shower? Are all rugs tacked down?

“Throw rugs are a big tripping hazard,” she noted, explaining that sometimes all that is needed is two-sided tape to keep the rug down.

And what about the clutter? Piles everywhere can be tripping hazards. Piles of papers, too much furniture and a lifetime of mementos only spell trouble for a person who needs a walker or a cane to get around.

She scans the stairs to make sure nothing at all is placed on them.

These are but a few of the things Weisel checks during her visit.

And she asks questions about chores. Does the elderly person have someone to turn to for car rides, shopping and medical visits?

But fear not, even if the answers to all these questions point to problems and hazards, that doesn't mean it's time to move out of your own home.

Weisel, who has been with the agency since May 2006, has a slew of suggestions and lists of people to call who can old-age proof your home.

Recommendations for housekeeping and handymen who specialize in making the bathroom and other rooms safe are part of her job.

She tells them of companies that deliver groceries. And she talks about the agency's Meals on Wheels program, that uses volunteers to

bring kosher meals prepared by the Hebrew Home of Greater Washington right to your door.

She tries to steer clear of agencies that do all their work via computers as many seniors either don't have a computer or aren't comfortable using one, Weisel noted.

“We look at the total picture. How are they managing?” she said.

JSSA can also recommend physical therapy, especially if she feels her client isn't getting around easily. “If they are using a cane and they would benefit from” a walker, she will recommend someone to help with that.

Depending upon the client's background, there often are grants and subsidies to pay for her recommendations.

“Two-thirds of our clients are Holocaust survivors. There are grants there,” she said.

However, she readily acknowledges there comes a time when living on one's own is no longer a good idea, no matter how many upgrades are made to the house and lifestyle.

“When is it time to place someone in a nursing home” is not an easy call, she noted.

“I can recommend whatever I want. I can be brutally honest,” she said. However, if people

don't want to move out of their home, they will not, she said.

“Competent people can make bad decisions. Sometimes you have to wait for a crisis, a fall, a health issue,” before an aging person will agree to move out of his or her home.

Rare is the time when people just agree to leave their home and all its memories.

“It doesn't typically work that way,” she noted.

In that case, Weisel works to gain their trust and make sure they have the necessary equipment and are availing themselves of all the services they can.

She can also refer people for neurological testing. Memory lapses can be a sign of a fixable problem or a sign of worse things to come. It can be mini-strokes, Alzheimer's Disease or a urinary tract infection.

“Memory loss is something different. We all forget. It's benign. It's not critical,” she said.

Weisel calls her job “very rewarding. I love my clients.”

She has a bachelor's and master's degree in social work from the University of Wisconsin and has worked in such fields as alcohol counseling and child protection services. She spent 24 years at the Hebrew Home of Greater Washington, both as a social worker and an administrator.

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