

## **Program finds homes for those in need One agency pairs extra rooms with those who can't pay rent**

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Before finding a haven in Aloha, Ruth Beer had about 18 months of bad luck, starting with a layoff and an injury and ending with the loss of her home. That's when Beer contacted the Shared Housing program of Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, which matches low-income people who need a roof over their heads with tri-county homeowners who have extra space. It is one of several programs that offer an opportunity for people to open their homes, hearts and minds to outsiders who need help. Many Washington County residents have done so -- with great results.

Through the Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon program, Beer found 76-year-old Dorothy Holt, who has diabetes and other health problems. Holt was living in Aloha with her daughter, who worked full time and wanted someone there to help her ailing mother but couldn't afford a caregiver. Beer was the answer. She shares their home rent-free, pays \$100 a month toward utilities, and spends about 40 hours a week with Holt -- cooking meals, doing laundry and otherwise helping where needed. Beer also has a part-time minimum-wage job. "She takes good care of me," said Holt, who first heard of the program last winter at the Hillsboro Senior Center. "I'm just sorry I didn't hear about it sooner."

Participants on both sides of the program include retirees, families and young singles, program manager Barbara Stone said. All must undergo criminal background checks. The program includes roughly 60 homeowners -- 25 currently in Washington County -- and 100 home seekers at any one time, said Stone, who is looking for a Washington County church that will volunteer to do client interviews.

Many home seekers can't pay market-rate rent, if any. But they are willing to exchange services such as yardwork, caregiving or housecleaning for a place to stay. Stays average 12 months, Stone said, with people often leaving when they've found a job or saved enough money for an apartment. But some setups work so well they continue for years. "If there's a senior or disabled person who needs help to continue to be able to live independently and they can swap a room for help, that works incredibly well," Stone said. "That's one of the hottest deals going."

For Beer, living with Holt and her daughter is a good arrangement while she regroups, saves money and searches for a better job. And she appreciates her housemates' flexibility: "They allowed me to have my kitty cat. That was huge for me. He was the only thing I had left."

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