



## "Moving Managers" Help Seniors Downsize

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Jim Higgins, Gentle Transitions moving facilitator, with client Nancy Lewis

What would a contemporary Cinderella, now aged 75, wish of her fairy godmother? Faced with the prospect of downsizing for a move to the palace for retired royalty, she would probably ask for a quick and painless transition. Just a few waves of the wand, and presto, she and her prince would be happily ensconced in their new quarters, surrounded by their favorite things, and everything else would have been distributed among their loyal and deserving subjects.

Cinderella can use magic. What about the average senior or senior couple who decide to move out of a house they have occupied for 30 to 40 years? There's no fairy godmother out there, but there are senior moving managers. They can orchestrate a move from beginning to end -- from what to take or give away to unpacking at the new place to disposing of the 50 to 75 boxes that most seniors need to transport their belongings. Self-described as the "wedding planners of movers," senior moving managers oversee a major life event while calming the anxious principals. They deal with anything and everything that comes along, ensuring that the big day proceeds smoothly.

This nascent specialty fills a much-needed niche in the ever-burgeoning world of seniors in transition. Although Americans on average move about every seven years, a very sizable percentage of older folks have lived in the same house for decades. Those who decide to move to a smaller unit in a condo or a retirement community -- or are nudged in that

direction by their adult children -- are faced with dismantling a lifetime's worth of possessions and memories. The prospect is daunting.

In many cases, the adult children take charge of the move. But, oftentimes the "kids" can't take time off from their jobs; or they live in other parts of the country; or, as Genevieve Auguste, who heads Art of Moving and Living, in Bethesda, Md. said, "They get along well but don't want to start World War III." Another problem with family help is that the sorting and dismantling can take forever. Everyone frequently stops to reminisce about all the different pieces of their shared past, and the parents usually have to be out of their house in a relatively short period of time. Beyond the practical reasons, Auguste said, the clients tend to accept advice more readily when it comes from a neutral third party.

At the senior moving manager's initial visit, he or she explains how they will orchestrate the move, devises a game plan tailored to those clients, and, most importantly, defuses a lot of pent-up anxiety. For most clients, it comes as a great relief to learn that the senior moving manager -- or facilitator, as most call themselves on the job -- has many resources and can find "a good home" for everything usable that the seniors are leaving behind, Auguste said.

On the second visit, the enterprise begins in earnest and the sorting starts. The facilitator goes through the house with the clients and puts designation stickers on every item. Diane Bjorkman, who heads Gentle Transitions in Edina, Minn., uses red, yellow and green stickers, which she characterizes as "traffic lights." "Red is trash and a no go," she said. "Yellow is a maybe, and green is a treasure and a definite yes."

At times, the sorting can get testy, but humor and tact will usually bring the clients around, said Tammy Wilcox, a facilitator who works with Bjorkman. "They all start by saying, 'I want to take everything,' and I tell them, 'It's either you or your sofa!'" As she moves through the house Wilcox said it's important to remember that "wheat and chaff" designations are subjective and that a pile of paperbacks may be very special to one person but trash to another.

The facilitator also has to nudge the client to be practical. For example, Wilcox said people might want to take all their cooking equipment, but they haven't cooked in 15 years.

Early in the process, the facilitator makes a site visit to the new quarters, most often a condo or an apartment in a retirement campus that can include independent, assisted living, and/or complete care arrangements. The information gathered is critical because the drawings given to the clients are often incomplete. The facilitator re-measures the space and adds important details such as wall bump-outs or recesses, exact window and door locations, door swings, and ceiling heights.

The next step is the great reality check -- reconciling what the clients want to take with what will fit. Greg Gunderson, who heads Gentle Transitions in Manhattan Beach, Calif., takes a low-tech approach. Working with the clients, he attaches the corrected plan to a magnetic board and then arranges scaled pieces on it that represent their furniture. He's found that this is a quick and easy way to try several different arrangements and that it also prods the clients into being realistic about what will fit. Gloria Bersani, of Gero solutions in Chicago, is more high-tech -- she uses a CAD (computer-aided design) software program to lay out the plan and determine furniture placement.

In cases where a client lives alone and is not able to participate in the sorting decisions because of ill health or dementia, an experienced facilitator can figure out what is used on a daily basis and should be moved to the new place. To make the transition as easy as possible for someone with severe dementia, Wilcox photographs the client's house and arranges the furniture in the new place to match it as closely as possible. She's so skilled at this, she said, "Many don't realize they are not at their old house."

The flip side of where to put the furnishings in the new place is what to do with everything else. For many families, this is the facilitator's most important service. After dozens of moves, the facilitator knows exactly whom to call for which item. If the clients have artwork or something that appears to be a valuable antique, he or she brings in an appraiser. If there are enough salable pieces of furniture and other items such as china and table linens, the facilitator arranges for someone to hold an estate sale in the house or to take the items somewhere else to be sold. If the salable items have less value, she arranges for a garage sale. More often than not, the eight facilitators I interviewed said the furnishings are "donatable" but not sellable and they contact a charity to pick them up. Adult children take some things, but often they already have a house full of their own furnishings.

When the sorting and designating are completed, the facilitator arranges for the packing. Some facilitators bring in a crew to do the packing, and some do not. The critical factor is having enough people to do it in a day so that the clients' lives are minimally disrupted. The packing is scheduled for the day before the clients move. When possible, the clients are not there, and they spend the night in a hotel or with a relative. If the clients stay until the end, the facilitator does not disturb their bedroom until the morning of the move so as to minimize the distressingly "naked" look of any household that is being readied for a move.

On moving day, the facilitator and packing crew go to the new place, unpack everything, put it away, remove all the

packing boxes, make the bed and, often, leave flowers before departing. The seniors are "tucked into" their new home, ready to start the next chapter in their lives and make new friends.

### **How do you find a Moving Manager?**

The moving managers I spoke with said most of their clientele learns about them from the staff of the senior community they are moving into. In some cases, the retirement facility will cover all or part of the facilitator's cost.

Senior moving managers are not, as yet, a widely known service, but there is a national organization, the National Association of Senior Moving Managers, which has a locator feature on its website ([www.nasmm.com](http://www.nasmm.com)). NASMM has about 100 member firms. Many of them are small mom-and-pop operations, but the older and more established have as many as 25 employees. To accommodate a long distance move, the members often work together, with

one orchestrating things at the senior's current residence, and the other handling the move-in at the new place. One NASMM firm, Art of Moving and Living, which has offices in both Bethesda, Md., and Miami, has its own national network of partners, and it also manages second homes.

Although the NASMM organization and its members specialize in senior moves, they will move anyone of any age. Some orchestrate executive relocations for major corporations, some move much younger families because a parent may be temporarily incapacitated by a broken kneecap, for example. All of them work with the "young-old" -- the age 55 and older group who may still be working full time and not have time to deal with a move, or who may be retired and able to do much of the work themselves but still need guidance and advice.