

## How to live rent-free and make a difference

June 12, 2015

Amelia Barnes

[Tweet](#) 30 [Share](#) 321 [Share](#) 6 [Pin it](#) [submit](#)

[Email article](#) [Print](#) [Reprints & permissions](#)

Advertisement



89-year-old Barbara Smith and Yin Chen participate in a Homeshare program. *Photo: Wayne Taylor*

Homeshare programs around the country are offering eligible participants the chance to live rent-free.

Designed to aid those who are older or have a disability, homeshare arrangements match householders with housemates to provide assistance around the home instead of paying rent.

In exchange for a bedroom and use of communal facilities, the homesharers are expected to provide about 10 hours of practical support a week such as cooking, cleaning, shopping and gardening.

The programs are designed to mutually benefit those involved, helping to bridge the gap between independent living and institutional aged care facilities.

Yin Chen\* has shared the home of Barbara Smith\* for more than four years as part of Wesley Mission Victoria's Homeshare program.

The arrangement has allowed Chen (who is in her early 30s) the chance to improve her English since arriving from China five years ago, while offering Barbara, 89, an increased sense of security at night.

"Yin cooks dinner most weeknights and we go shopping together on Saturday morning which equates roughly to the 10 hours contracted for," Smith says. "We don't spend time counting exactly but try to be careful not to ask too much."

The enviably located inner-southern suburbs home is Chen's third assignment on the program.

"I was particularly close to my first granny and her children. We supported each other during the days when her health deteriorated, when she moved into nursing home and when she passed away," she says. "They are like my families in Melbourne ... They all have very interesting stories to share and I have been privileged to share some moments in the latter part of their stories."

While free accommodation is what attracts most participants to Homeshare, the program has also provided Chen with a heightened sense of community away from home.



*The homeshare arrangement has benefited both Chen and Smith. Photo: Wayne Taylor*

"When I was new in town, I felt left out, not connected to anyone local. I thought the program would help me to make friends and boost up my Aussie English level," she says. "Without the burden of rent, I have been able to save up for holidays, university tuition fees and have some savings to support myself through my second master's degree."

29-year-old Daniel Collins\* has been participating in UnitingCare's lifeAssist Homeshare program since February.

Living rent-free in exchange for assisting his 89-year-old householder, Collins says the arrangement has been a "huge financial help".

"I just contribute towards utility bills ... In my case, I help out in the garden and clean windows," he says.

Home care organisation [Care Connect](#) arranges Homeshare partnerships across Melbourne.

"With Australia's population ageing and the proportion of individuals who live alone on the rise we need to find new ways to support each other as a community," says Care Connect chief executive Paul Ostrowski. "Homeshare is a unique way of bringing together people with complementary needs, so that they can assist each other in a safe, supported environment."

Ostrowski emphasises that these arrangements do not take the place of existing or future support workers and care services.

"The people who share the house are not there to provide personal care – they might do things like walk the dog, or help with the cleaning, gardening, shopping or cooking," he says.

All participants in the Care Connect program undergo security checks and receive ongoing monitoring to ensure the arrangements remain mutually beneficial.

[Perth Home Care Services](#) (PHCS) also hosts its own Homeshare program, which works to establish natural and inclusive relationships between parties.

The organisers are passionate about matching likeminded people together, with multiple interviews and introductory periods conducted before arrangements are finalised.

"They're involved in the advertising and interview process and have as much say and control as they like into who moves in," says Gelinda Kock, Manager of Shared Living.

For PHCS, friendship is at the forefront of all arrangements, along with building a sense of purpose, contribution and extending the social networks of those involved.

Kock prefers that homesharers don't have any formal qualifications in aged care or social work, in order for the arrangement to feel as natural as possible.

"It's not a job; you're a housemate first," she says. "It's really important to explore people's expectations beforehand; it's not for everybody."

Perth Home Care Services has established close to 20 living arrangements during seven years of operation.

*\*Names have been partially or completely changed for privacy.*