

# THE CASE FOR COMMUNITY NURSING HOME

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Vahe H. Apelian, Loveland, OH, 9 November 2010

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I was reminded of this story after having read Viken L. Attarian's guest-editorial about demographic database where he states: "for example, there have been several attempts in the past and even recently to create Armenian retirement homes or homes for the elderly, the argument being that our elderly do not speak English or French and prefer to be with other Armenians (services to include Armenian cooking, church services and Armenian traditional activities). While this might have been the case 30-40 years ago, there is no scientific evidence that suggests that this is true today, i.e. that 10 years from now we would actually have a group of retirees who would want, need and be ready to finance such an effort. We could be wasting a lot of resources raising the funds to build such an institution but it could be simply another enormous waste of our resources."

On a positive note I thought this might lead to healthy discussion in Keghart.com regarding the need for more retirement homes, assisted living, and skilled nursing within the Armenian community.

To give some structure to my train of thoughts I would like to have the following introduction. I served on the board of trustees of the Home for the Armenian Aged, Inc. in Emerson, NJ for a decade. My last board meeting was the evening prior to my departure day, as the company I would work for relocated me first to be followed by my family. That makes my last board meeting in March 1995 and which brings my first board meeting 25 years ago. I am fast approaching middle 60s. Consequently I was 39 years old when I joined the board, at an age when one does not give much thought of getting old. Those ten years became an education for me. My father's last year was in a nursing home in LA, not the Ararat nursing home. My mother is now living with us. Eventual need for a nursing home looms for her as well it does for me, as kids grow and move away.

I would also like to note that there was a time in my youth when I considered Diaspora transient on our way to settle in Armenia. I admit I had utopian and euphoric notions of a homeland and was not

prepared for the stark reality of the past 19 years. I am now convinced that Diaspora will be my lasting place and that my granddaughter will all likely live, God willing, all her life in Diaspora. Therefore, we do have obligations to attend to matters pertaining to our long-term stay in Diaspora as we do towards our homeland. A nursing home in Armenia for Diaspora Armenians is not a viable option. Who among us would want to leave family and friends behind and move to Armenia to spend the twilight of his or her later years there?

It would be a wrong notion to visualize an Armenian nursing or assisted living home run by an Armenian staff all through. It is very likely, while some of the professionals such as doctors, nurses, administrators etc. may be Armenian, the reality is that the majority of the staff, be it nurses' aides, dietary workers, activities assistants, housekeeping will be non Armenians. Even then you need to be conversant in English or French or both to have good communication with all those who will take daily care of the person. Proficiency of the English or French language is not relevant to have retirement home within the community at large.

Community financing of an Armenian nursing home may be mischaracterization without defining as to what the financing entails. Obviously nursing homes function under strict federal, state or government guidelines and there is state assistance by way of Medicare or Medicaid in case of U.S.A. It is a common fact that even for the so called financially well prepared, their savings get depleted and thus they outlive their savings. Obviously community sponsored nursing homes entail erecting the facility and managing it. I do not mean to say administering it. In United States there are such nursing homes in Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, Michigan and California. However, I do not think they are sufficient to meet the needs of the aged Armenians.

Why the case for community nursing homes then, when all function under the same guidelines? In my view community nursing homes render better quality care. They are by nature under the watchful eye of the community. They become magnets where school children go to perform, priests go to render mass, dignitaries to visit, and our national and religious holidays are observed. Many auxiliary groups congregate around the ethnic nursing homes and there is a better pool of volunteers. Well beyond the language issues there are real life advantages for community nursing homes.

The Home for the Armenian Aged, Inc. in Emerson, NJ was founded in 1938. At its 50th anniversary, in 1993, I researched and wrote the story of its founding and progress the community had made from maintaining a chicken house and growing their own vegetables on the premises of the Home for the residents' use in its formative years to the veritable institution it had become fifty years later. I had concluded my history of the Home thus, and 17 years later I stand by that conclusion.

I quote: "The sociologist claim that we are heading towards a graying society and statistical projections predict that an increasing number of the population will need the care of a nursing home in the twilight of their later years. Also there was a large influx of Armenians in the mid-seventies

from Middle East and what was the former Soviet Union, who in case of need, most likely will seek the familiarity of their ethnic nursing homes. Such trends indicate that the Home will continue to function as a viable institution well into the twenty first century. However, members of the community need to continue to assume responsibility of managing the Home prudently and soundly. The ever escalating cost of health care, and the dwindling financial resources, paradoxically couples with increasing compliance standards, ever so more will require the continual community management and support to keep the spirit and the purpose of its Founders alive and viable to meet the needs of the once productive citizens of this nation"

