

# THE SMALL HOMES JOURNEY: Reimagining Traditional Skilled Nursing Home Settings



## Our Small Homes Vision

We can all agree that older adults deserve to spend their days and nights in settings where they can thrive as individuals. Unfortunately, the traditional model of skilled care historically has missed the mark in terms of fostering individuality. For decades, nursing homes have been thought of as large, institutional dwellings with long hallways lined with wheelchairs, lifts, and other medical equipment. The abundance of semiprivate rooms meant that most residents had a roommate sharing a small amount of open living space. A person's ability to take advantage of common areas throughout the building—except during scheduled group activities—was often determined by how close these locations were to their own rooms. People have been living out their later years of life in environments

that look more like hospitals than an actual home for far too long.

For a moment, consider the floor plans of most hospitals. A traditional hospital is a place meant for treating a serious injury or illness. Buildings are set up in a way to efficiently treat as many patients as possible while keeping them safe during a time of great vulnerability. Today's hospitals put a great deal of effort into keeping patients comfortable during their stays, but the number one goal is to heal people so they can go home. Now imagine going "home" to a place with a similar look and feel of the hospital you just left.

Alternatively, what if those leaving the hospital for skilled care rehabilitation could go "home" to a place that felt like an actual home?

It is not that the idea of skilled nursing spaces, where residents have a real choice in how they spend their lives each day is a recent phenomenon. There have been incredible national movements—some of which that have gotten their starts right here in Rochester, New York—that have paved the way for a new type of nursing home for residents of the 21st century. Smaller, more intimate skilled nursing homes are being built all over the country. These communities are specially designed with comfort and convenience in mind; making living in a nursing home more desirable.

The [St. John's Small Homes Initiative](#) demonstrates what can be done when an organization decides it is possible to take a nursing home built over a half century ago within the confines of the old, tired medical model of senior care and transform it into several distinct, neighborhood homes that reflect the people who live there. The St. John's mission is to help older adults embrace life with caring, vibrant, life-affirming relationships.

Our Small Homes story reflects our promise to ensure that each resident in our care has the opportunity to live in a neighborhood they can truly call their own.

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## The History of Small Homes

St. John's Home is a 455-bed skilled nursing facility situated across eight acres of Rochester's Highland Park neighborhood. Originally built in 1960 with major renovations following in 1972 and 1975, resident rooms are located throughout two six-floor high rise buildings. Despite being one of the area's largest nursing homes, St. John's Home has taken a progressive approach towards caring for elders for many years. In 1997, St. John's Home became the first [Eden Alternative](#) skilled nursing home in New York State, a designation it still holds today.

In the mid-2000s, St. John's began moving towards taking a smaller approach to delivering skilled nursing care. Plans were developed to take 20 skilled nursing beds and redistribute them for a new project that would result in something never before seen across the country. [In 2011, St. John's opened two newly built 10-bed nursing homes in the nearby suburb of Penfield, New York.](#) These new homes—inspired by and supported through the internationally recognized Green House Project—became the first of their kind located in a residential neighborhood.

The St. John's Green House homes quickly became a place that residents, their loved ones, and employees preferred over traditional nursing home spaces. The level of satisfaction for all involved have remained at or near 100% since the Green Houses opened; a reality that was very quickly recognized by members of the St. John's



FEBRUARY 28, 2012

Moving day! Rebecca Priest, pictured at right, and other St. John's staff help residents move to their new (Green House) home in Penfield, NY.

administration. [Rebecca Priest](#) served as the first guide for the St. John's Green House homes and soon became administrator at St. John's Home before eventually serving as vice president of skilled services at St. John's through the end of 2017. Her central role in the success of the Green Houses opened her eyes to the need to reimagine the other skilled nursing

home model in 2013. In September of that year, Priest led a change away from an industrial conveyor belt tray line used during meal times in the preceding decades. The idea was to leave behind the concept of mass producing the same meal for everyone who lived in the 455-bed nursing home and make the process of meal choice and preparation more individualized.

Late in 2015, the first small home opened at St. John's Home. The Rose neighborhood became the first to match physical renovations to create a home-like atmosphere with a staff trained to provide care and support on much more intimate level.



BEFORE



AFTER

options at St. John's. "We opened Penfield in 2011, stabilized it in a year, and then I knew I had to start working on 150 (Highland Avenue)," remembers Priest. She soon began leading the charge towards creating a new culture at St. John's Home, something that had been talked about ever since she started there as a social worker in 2005.

St. John's President and CEO Charlie Runyon and the rest of the leadership team agreed with Priest that the time was finally right for implementing the change needed to turn their legacy nursing home into a place of which they could all be proud. St. John's Home began its move away from the longstanding nursing

Priest called this transition "a real sentinel moment where we as an organization did something tangibly courageous that really shifted the model." The move away from the tray line model meant that staff could develop a better idea of what residents did and did not like to eat and also gave them better control over portions. "It was a pretty big shift," says Priest.

As time went on, Priest and her leadership team continued to implement more changes to make the experience of those living at St. John's Home increasingly like day-to-day home life for residents at the Green House homes. Despite the difference between the physical structure and layout of St. John's Home and

what had previously been the ideal configuration of the Green House model, the team was creative in how they rolled out new philosophies within existing spaces. At the same time, a significant portion of annual budgets for skilled nursing throughout the organization were being earmarked for renovating floors into a series of smaller neighborhoods. The stage was set for St. John's to begin transitioning from one, large skilled nursing facility to smaller neighborhood houses within the building.

Late in 2015, the first small home opened at St. John's Home. The Rose neighborhood—located on the sixth floor of the Reservoir high rise building—became the first to match physical renovations to create a home-like atmosphere with a staff trained to provide care and support on much more intimate level. Today, St. John's Home is a collection of six individually run neighborhoods where residents have a greater say in how they live their lives.

## Growing Together and Lessons to Share

At the heart of the Small Homes initiative is the Shahbaz: a universal care worker who works to get to know residents on a deeper level by becoming more personally involved in individual aspects of their daily life. The role of shahbaz (or shahbazim in its plural form) was a concept envisioned by nursing home [culture change pioneer Dr. Bill Thomas](#) and has become the lifeblood of the Green House Project since its inception. The shahbaz role replaces the previous, more one-dimensional position of certified nursing assistant.

Rebecca Priest saw the pivotal nature of this role firsthand during the first year of St. John's Green House home initiative. "Our residents told us they wanted to see the same caregivers every day," Priest told [SeniorAdvisor.com](#) in 2017. By taking on additional roles such as preparing meals, housekeeping, and leading house activities along with caregiving duties, shahbazim get to know the people they support while shrinking caregiver-to-resident ratios. Shahbazim work as a team to run the house, which means employees choosing to take on this role must be able to both work autonomously and have a genuine desire to create something from the ground up.

Ultimately, the key to the success of this model is having total buy-in from staff throughout a given house. This can be difficult, especially when you have a workforce made up primarily of employees used to working in a traditional medical model nursing home. It takes senior leadership, neighborhood administrators (similar to the guide role in the Green Houses), and directors of nursing, activities, dining, and human resources to champion this more social model while moving away from the medical model of the past. According to Priest, these key stakeholders throughout the organization "set the tenor for how the organization supports the houses. And everything they are doing should be to reinforce shahbazim success."



AUGUST 19, 2009

Long-term care pioneer and change agent Dr. Bill Thomas visits St. John's Home to discuss how to create, and the benefits of, a different kind of nursing home.

## Opening of the Green House Homes: A Look Back



*"It's the environment we would all want for ourselves. It's home."*

Susan Ryan was project manager for the Green House Project who oversaw the development of the Green House Homes in Penfield, New York through their opening in 2011. She has fond recollections of the day St. John's opened their first Green House homes. "Until the Penfield homes, all other Green House homes had been built on the campuses of senior living communities," says Ryan, now the senior director at the Green House Project. "The organization had been on a culture change journey for several years, so the passion for change and doing better was part of the culture."

This first-of-its-kind initiative to offer skilled nursing care in the middle of a residential neighborhood had a transformational effect on residents moving into their new home. "There were many elders who literally 'woke up' as they encountered the power of home, relationships, and community to engender meaningful life," explains Ryan. Some residents moved directly from home

while others came from other skilled nursing facilities. According to Ryan, this new environment started to look less like a nursing home and more like the neighborhoods they lived in earlier in their lives. "Instead of having a group activity among other elders within the senior living community, they were having block parties with their neighbors, sharing the walking path with others in the neighborhood, and exchanging gardening secrets with each other...just as we would do in our own homes and neighborhoods."

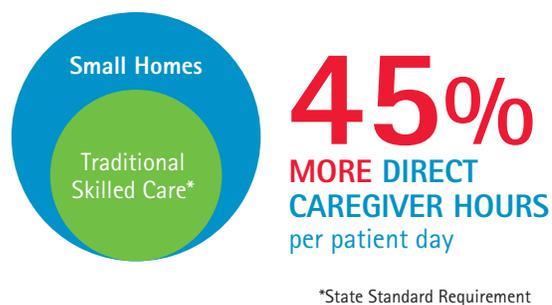
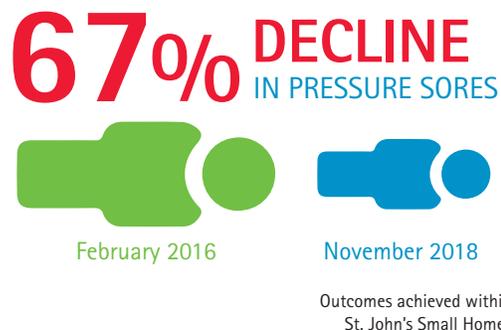
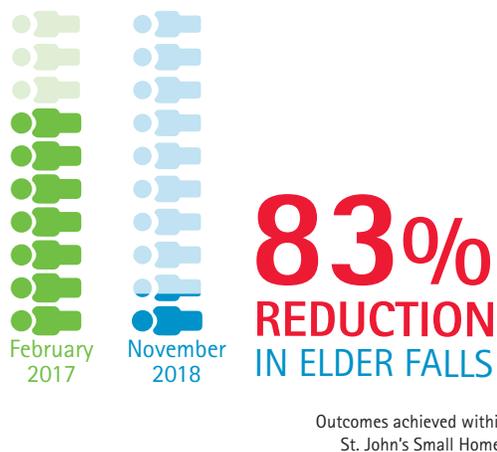
Ryan remembers how this new model of care had a profound effect on St. John's employees working in the Green House homes. "The staff learned new life skills and developed the ability to work as a team. They persisted in unique ways that enabled them to push hard against the status quo. They didn't give up, or seek the easier path, when one challenge after another emerged. They rolled up their sleeves, and worked hard to see the vision to fruition."

## The Impact of the Small Homes Movement

Data have consistently pointed towards nursing home care in smaller settings as the optimal method of delivery in nearly every category. An Australian study released in 2018 indicates that residents living in the “household model of care” enjoy the benefits of better outcomes compared to those living in traditional nursing homes. These outcomes include 68% lower rate of hospital admissions and 73% lower rate of emergency room visits. Results from this research also show that residents enjoy a higher quality of life while operators are able to deliver this type of care in a cost-effective manner.

Resident outcomes at the St. John’s Green House homes have been reliable in their reflection of the positive benefits universally seen in similar small nursing home settings. A stark reduction in resident falls and adverse elder-to-elder interactions was immediately seen when compared to traditional skilled care. Length of stay at the green houses also increased, with people staying 12-18 months longer than before.

As neighborhoods throughout St. John’s Home have transitioned to small homes, a series of positive outcomes have been realized. Like the green houses, small homes have seen a decrease in falls and adverse behaviors as well as in pressure ulcers and the decreased use of psychotropic medications. Higher census figures and a more advantageous private pay rate were intended results of St. John’s commitment to the small homes transition. As skilled nursing options throughout the entire organization have steadily improved, St. John’s Home has become a more attractive option to prospective residents, family members, and referral sources. The positive financial statistics reflect this shift, as do recent improvements in commonly recognized quality metrics. One notable example of this trend was the jump in the St. John’s “Quality of Resident Care” rating from three to five stars through the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid services.



## Small Homes: The Path Ahead

Understandably, St. John's did not have the resources to immediately begin massive renovations throughout every floor of the nursing home all at once. As a result, further physical renovations have come slowly. However, changes to the way the care within each household is delivered has continued to evolve. By the end of 2017, every floor throughout St. John's Home had made a transition to operating with self-managed teams, featuring shahbazim providing direct care to residents.

Despite the inability to launch immediate, full-scale construction, physical enhancements have indeed been made throughout the building. This includes renovated kitchens and dining rooms on many of the neighborhoods as well as new, more welcoming foyers replacing the nursing stations so closely tied to what nursing homes of

the past have looked like. Additionally, resident apartments that have been renovated have been converted to private rooms with an eye on designed bedrooms with a similar look to what you might find at home.

"Our physical building here has different styles on different floors," says [Nate Sweeney, current vice president of skilled services at St. Johns](#). "We have some that naturally lend themselves to small houses while others we have needed to put more thought into how to minimize that living space." Throughout the small homes transition, each individual household has established a unique look-and-feel that still holds true today.

Currently, the Apple Blossom neighborhood is under major renovation with the goal of recreating a space that better reflects this new model. These new updates allow for St. John's to learn from previous renovation projects and tailor updates based on some unmet needs, like the availability of storage space. "We are able to make this household more comfortable for residents while also correcting issues we now know are important," says Sweeney. Funds to support these physical renovations came from St. John's Foundation.

The small homes initiative is one that is constantly evolving. At times, new challenges as well as newly discovered opportunities to improve the resident experience have forced St. John's to recalibrate how change in skilled nursing services is rolled out. What is on the horizon are upcoming renovations to common areas designed to make the spaces more resident-friendly and welcoming. This includes the former administration offices on the ground floor, which was determined to be a key area where residents from different households could meet for shared programming.

Sweeney's vision is to eventually develop small homes where the make-up of the population reflects common strengths and interests of the residents living in the household. St. John's has also begun offering respite care in small home settings for residents and family members wishing to try out this unique brand of skilled nursing care.



JUNE 5, 2018

Resident Carolyn Rosica, representing the Tulip neighborhood, celebrates her Wheel of Fortune win during St. John's *Game Show Week*.

## A Small Homes Success Story



Diane Lochner was having a difficult time finding the right home for her husband Larry. After a stay in the hospital followed by two different nursing home rehabs, Diane did not feel like they had a setting that met Larry's unique needs. "He was clinically complex," says Alyssa Ferrigno, a geriatric care manager with [Care Consultants of Rochester](#) who Diane hired to help find a new community where Larry could thrive. "Diane was very discriminating, and he (Larry) needed more individualized care."

Ferrigno—knowing about the small home's philosophy at St. John's Home—suggested the Lochners consider taking a tour. "We came and saw the actual room," remembers Diane. They toured Lilac neighborhood that happens to be located on the same floor as the rehabilitation gym where Larry would receive physical and occupational therapy. "We saw the neighborhood he would live on and liked that he wouldn't be lost on a floor with 40 other people."

Over two years after moving to St. John's, Larry Lochner continues to thrive at his home on the Lilac neighborhood. Larry loves the view from his window, the intimacy of the smaller setting,

and the family atmosphere that is palpable throughout the household. The care manager who referred the Lochners was confident that St. John's could accommodate their wants and needs, and has since recommended small homes settings to several of her other clients. "I wanted him to have the best room he could get with the most space, because I knew Diane and other family would be around all of the time," says Ferrigno. "It does feel more like a home than a nursing home."

[The Lochners have found the perfect place for Larry](#)—one where his friends and family can also feel at home. "People know your name and we know everyone else's," says Diane. They have made friends with staff members as well as the family members of other residents, often sharing meals in the Lilac neighborhood's small dining room. "There are a core group of family members who are here all the time. It's very conducive to getting to know people."

[Want to tour a St. John's small home?](#)  
[Click here to schedule a visit.](#)

## Encapsulating Small Homes

A small group of St. John's employees recently gathered to develop a formal vision statement for the small homes movement. The consensus amongst the group was that this statement properly encapsulates what St. John's is doing to deliver skilled nursing services differently and the unique journey the organization is taking.



A community of belonging where lifestyles are honored, strengths are celebrated, and choice is the foundation of daily life.

