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**Paths to Environmental  
Stewardship**

**Energy Independence**

→ **Gray is the New Green**

**AAHSA Homecoming Celebrations  
HUD 202 Refinancings**

**Aging  
Services  
Goes  
Green**

# Contents

## features

### 6 The Path to Environmental Stewardship

Aging-services providers tie mission and social accountability to environmental protection.

BY JEAN VAN RYZIN

### 12 Starting the Journey: Frameworks for Sustainability

Here is a look at two models of sustainability that can be valuable frameworks for organizations learning to “green” their practices.

BY ALYSHA LILJEQVIST

### 14 Energy Independence: Going Green to Save Green

Providers seek technologies and practices that reduce energy use.

BY DEBRA WOOD, R.N.

### 18 Old Buildings, Good as New—or Better

There is a world of green options for renovating existing facilities.

BY LISETTE HILTON

### 22 Gray is the New Green

Look again: Your parents just might be greener than you are.

BY SUSANNE MATTHIESEN AND RENÉE BIBBY



Valle Verde Retirement Community

6



Murphy/Jahn

14

## departments

- 4 **Vision**  
“Alysha Has Worms ...”
- 5 **From the Editor**
- 27 **Number Crunch**  
CNAs Offered Benefits, But Many Decline Health Insurance
- 42 **Ideas & Innovations**
- 46 **AAHSA Synergy**
- 48 **Index of Advertisers**

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# Gray is the New Green

*Look again: Your parents just might be greener than you are.*

by Susanne Matthiesen and Renée Bibby

The “greening” of aging services isn’t something being imposed on elders by their children and their service providers. In many cases, senior citizens are leading the way in promoting environmental responsibility.

Laurel Lake’s “Green Team” of committed residents has launched a many-faceted recycling program and is now looking to expand its efforts into other areas. Left to right: Bill Fissinger, Bob Clark, Ann Wright, Howdy Holschuh and Les Massey.

**L**aurel Lake Retirement Community sits on a sprawling 150-acre campus in Hudson, Ohio. With grass, trees, lakes and protected wetlands, the community is home to active seniors in an idyllic setting.

When Bill and Margaret Fissinger retired and decided to return to Ohio in 2004, Laurel Lake was a good fit for them.

At that time, the city of Hudson picked up trash as part of the county waste management program. Trash included all organic waste, metal and recyclables. Laurel Lake did have a limited program for recycling aluminum and cardboard, but residents weren’t really using it. The Fissingers, like many other residents, had come from places where recycling was a way of life. Believing that Laurel Lake should be doing more recycling, Bill spoke up at a weekly meeting with then-Execu-

tive Director George Paulson.

Management agreed with the residents. Soon afterward, a recycling task force (“The Green Team”) of staff members and residents was charged with learning how recycling could be implemented on campus even if the city didn’t currently support it. This also meant the team would have to outline the costs and staff responsibilities for recycling.

## Part of the Next Big Thing

The green movement at Laurel Lake is not an anomaly. As the environmental surge builds strength, seniors are playing an integral and prominent role. They’re promoting environmentally friendly buildings in their retirement communities, developing and implementing programs that reduce and reuse, and teaching upcoming generations about creating a more sustainable world.

GrayIsGreen, a not-for-profit organization created by residents of the Whitney Center in Hamden, Conn., is a leader in networking and sharing resources for building and promoting sustainable programs for the environment. The GrayIsGreen Web site explicitly champions the role seniors should take in environmental issues: “We address our appeal broadly: first, of course, to our fellow elders, then to seniors about to become elders, then, to our children, the boomers, who are about to inherit the Earth, and to their children and their children’s children in that seamless web of continuity that is the future of humankind.”

The organization’s *Handbook on Conservation for Retirement Communities* is a primer on all that a community can do to rectify damage to the environment, from the type of appliances to buy to the design of environmentally friendly buildings and



Laurel Lake Retirement Community

landscapes.

Other groups are also helping lead the way. Green Seniors provides guidance on how seniors can lobby, create rallies and build active communities. The Environmental Alliance for Senior Involvement (EASI) grew out of an early-1990s agreement between AARP and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Generations United also has programs that connect seniors with younger people to improve the environment. Across the board, seniors are proving to be effective, powerful leaders in promoting healthier places to live.

The power of senior involvement bore fruit at Laurel Lake. The recycling task force found Abitibi Consolidated, a Canadian company that was not only willing to pick up recycling at Laurel Lake, but to pay for it too. Because the company can make a profit on recycled paper, it's willing to pay for raw materials commonly tossed out with the garbage. To date, Laurel Lake has collected 249 tons of paper in three years. That translates to \$3,730 in savings and 4,200 trees saved.

The benefits of recycling made sense to management, but wasn't an easy sell to everyone at Laurel Lake. The issue wasn't convincing management to invest time in the project; it was combating residents' inertia.

Fortunately, the recycling team was staffed by people whose previous jobs had prepared them for this sort of challenge. Besides Bill Fissinger, who is a former development officer with experience in public relations and fundraising, the com-

mittee included Art Herrick, a Kent State professor emeritus of biological sciences and founding member of The Nature Conservancy in Ohio; Mary Tatman, the staff chaplain who lives in green housing and felt personally committed to help create change; Howdy Holschuh, a captain with experience in naval intelligence; and Les Massey, a retired electrical engineer.

The committee launched a program to promote awareness and encourage new routines to take paper to the bins on campus. The easy-to-remember rule of recycling was, "If it came in the mail, you can recycle it."

Ann Wright, the chair of the committee and a founding staff member, reports that Laurel Lake met with city council members to talk about the importance of recycling. Hudson is now researching how it can implement a mandatory recycling project.

With profits coming from recycling and a minimum amount of staff time required to sustain the program, Fissinger reports that the initial proposal was a success. Management and residents are successful recyclers. Naturally, the program expanded. In summer 2006, the group extended the scope of recyclables to include non-paper products, such as old televisions and printer ink cartridges. Laurel Lake also has a computer recycling program and a program that donates cell phones to the Cleveland Zoological Society—putting

money back into the community and wildlife preservation. Several residents suggested starting a program that allows them to recycle their non-narcotic prescription medicines. Unopened prescription drugs can be used in free clinics.

Fissinger says the next step is exploring ways to make the buildings and landscaping more environmentally efficient. They'd like to see what they can do regarding using solar power and recycling metals and plastics. Laurel Lake is retaining a consultant to help develop a long-range greening strategy.

Without a doubt, management, residents, the Hudson community and the environment benefit from these positive changes and prove Margaret Mead's point: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." 

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## Resources

### Laurel Lake Retirement Community, Hudson, Ohio

Contacts: David Oster, executive director, [david\\_oster@hmis.org](mailto:david_oster@hmis.org) or (866) 650-0681; Bill Fissinger, resident and Green Team member, [fissinger@hotmail.com](mailto:fissinger@hotmail.com) or (330) 528-6105.

### GraysGreen (c/o The Green Council at Whitney Center, Hamden, Conn.)

Contact: Robert Lane, [robert.lane@yale.edu](mailto:robert.lane@yale.edu). The organization's *Handbook on Conservation for Retirement Communities* is available for download at [www.grayisgreen.org](http://www.grayisgreen.org).

### Green Seniors

<http://greenseniors.typepad.com>.

### Environmental Alliance for Senior Involvement (EASI)

[www.easi.org](http://www.easi.org).

### Generations United

[www.gu.org](http://www.gu.org).

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