

# Ageless MAINE

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# A PLACE OF THEIR Own

**Avesta's independent living developments offer older  
Mainers safety, community, and surprising freedom.**

by Debra Spark Photography by Nicole Wolf





**S**haron Cleaves loved her house in Windham. “I built it myself. I am talking hammer and nails,” she says, miming the activity. But 13 years ago, after a fall, she realized that living alone no longer felt safe. Her children were grown and her husband had died. Fortuitously, Avesta Housing, a nonprofit provider of affordable housing, was building Unity Gardens, a senior independent living community, not far from her home. “If you have to move on, what better place to move on to?” says Cleaves, who is now 73. She ended up being the very first resident in the development, a large L-shaped building with white columns out front and gardens in back.

The ground floor at Unity Gardens has offices and gathering spaces, as well as a kitchen out of which a

Meals on Wheels program operates. Upstairs, the apartments branch off a long corridor, each one identical to the next and consisting of a kitchen/dining room with a half wall open to a living room, and a single bedroom. Because the floor plans are identical, residents like figuring out how others have chosen to decorate their spaces, observes Judy Bell, 78, another early resident. Small shelves by everyone’s front door give a clue to who is inside: a Patriots fan, a Saint Patrick’s Day aficionado, etc. Bell also moved to Unity Gardens after her children were grown. Originally from Aroostook County, she frequently visited the Windham area to see her sons and brother. One day, as she drove by Unity Gardens, her son suggested she put her name in for an apartment. The waiting list was long—she was told there were 100 names in front of her—but five

months later, she had her apartment. “I like it because everything I need is right here,” she says, referencing the shops down the road. Cleaves adds, “There’s a sense of losing freedom, but you actually gain freedom.”

Both she and Bell are very busy. Cleaves is a painter whose many paintings line the corridors and even the first-floor elevator door at Unity Gardens. Bell socializes over coffee, puzzles, and beano games; knits hats for cancer patients; and darts out for meals with relatives or to tend to shrubbery at her son’s house. “Mom,” he says, “You do too much.”

Helping residents thrive, as Cleaves and Bell do, is central to Avesta’s mission. The nonprofit has 2,500 individual units in approximately 88 developments, largely in York and Cumberland Counties, although it

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**Opposite:** Sharon Cleaves works on a painting in her apartment at Unity Gardens. Cleaves’s paintings decorate the hallways of the development in Windham, as well as those of several other Avesta facilities. **This page:** Lori Maxwell (left), administrator of Seventy-Five State Street in Portland, hugs resident Hazel Davis.

**This page:** Ginger Balog looks up from her art project at Seventy-Five State Street. **Opposite, from left:** Sharon Cleaves quilting in her apartment. Dana Tolman, president and CEO of Avesta Housing, whose mission is "to improve lives and strengthen communities by promoting and providing quality affordable homes for people in need."





also serves a small number of people in New Hampshire and central Maine. Not all of this housing is for seniors. Avesta has a number of target populations, including the chronically homeless. That said, Avesta typically provides homes subsidized for those with incomes of \$40,000 or less, and approximately half of that housing—1,400 units and 40 developments—is earmarked for older Mainers. No two developments are alike, and the eligibility requirements differ from project to project. Unfortunately, as Dana Totman, Avesta’s president and CEO, explains, “There’s a huge shortage of affordable housing for seniors.” The typical wait for a unit with Avesta ranges from two to 15 years; the current waiting list has 1,400 names, and only 130 apartments became available for seniors last year.

Avesta is doing its part to address the shortage, with 40 one-bedroom apartments planned for a site in Portland and 12 for a former school building in Paris. Among its many successes, Unity Gardens (with 48 apartments) is a standout property. “People *love* living there,” says Totman.

People also love living at Seventy-Five State Street, an independent and assisted living community in Portland’s West End that dates back to 1854, when it was founded as the Home for Aged and Indigent Women. Eventually, the organization transitioned to its current location and added an independent living component. Here, 154 apartments of different configurations are available, largely at market rate, although approximately 50 percent

of the 68 assisted living units can be subsidized through MaineCare (Maine’s Medicaid program). The monthly fee includes meals, activities, transportation, and other services. And while Unity Gardens has many activities spread out over the month—including coffees, potlucks, and tax prep help—activities at Seventy-Five State Street, like a reader’s theater group and a German conversation group, take place daily. There currently isn’t a waiting list for independent living apartments at Seventy-Five State Street, though the MaineCare-subsidized units are harder to come by.

Richard Anderson moved into Seventy-Five State Street a year after his wife died and 10 years after he retired, having worked as, among other things, the director of Maine



Audubon. At 83, he is now chairman of the Resident Council, representing the residents' interests to the administration. "When I got elected to the position, I thought people were going to call and say, 'When are you going to do this? When are you going to do that?' But everybody is happy in this place."

Sylvia Sherwood, 81, exemplifies Anderson's claim. She and her husband moved from near Charleston, South Carolina, to Seventy-Five State Street because her husband had medical needs, and they had family in Maine. After he died, Sherwood thought she might move out, but she liked her morning visits to the facility's coffee shop and not having to take care of a lawn or dig her car out of the snow in winter. "Plus, my children like having me here," she says. "They can visit me easily, and when the grandchildren come, we can go to restaurants or walk to the Old Port."

Another advantage, says Maryann O'Rourke, 79, the resident representative to Seventy-Five State Street's Board of Trustees, is that residents pay monthly for their apartments, so they do not need to commit a huge amount of upfront cash for their housing. "I am finished buying houses," she says. O'Rourke is from Greenwich, Connecticut. After she retired as executive director of an early childhood program, her children suggested she buy an apartment in Portland, but she wondered how she'd make friends. "What are you going to do? Stand around and say, 'Will you be my friend?' Here it is done for you." A further virtue is that should residents need to move from a market rate independent living apartment to assisted living but then find their financial resources dwindling, they can convert to MaineCare, if qualified. This means residents are not forced out of the facility, as can happen in private pay senior communities, observes Lori Maxwell, who has

overseen operations at Seventy-Five State Street (in different roles) for 20 years.

There's a constant bustle in the hallways at Seventy-Five State Street that there isn't at Unity Gardens, which reflects the different sensibilities of the residents. "A number of residents at Unity Gardens are strongly independent and they like their privacy," says Amy Grant-Thurlow, regional property manager at Avesta. Unity Gardens is structured to allow people to join in when they want—not everyone is going to like a Friday evening karaoke hour, after all—but otherwise maintain their autonomy.

At Seventy-Five State Street, Anderson says, "You are connected to everything when you live here." Residents, as Maxwell observes, feel safe, secure, and engaged. Conversation at a recent lunch ranged from Anderson figuring out how to

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—Richard Anderson, Seventy-Five State Street

microwave the smelt a friend gave him (after having blown one up), to how good the kitchen's desserts are, to how grateful Sherwood is that a bus took her husband to Portland Head Light for a visit, just two weeks before he died.

In the last 15 years, Avesta's properties, whether age-restricted or not, have tended to be in more urban areas to reflect, as Totman says, "smart growth," which means developing "closer to service communities." The result is that Avesta has options for the city mouse and the country mouse, although it's the nonsubsidized urban option that has vacancies at the moment. As for what to do to make the waiting lists for other apartments shorter, Avesta is continuing its advocacy efforts as a member of the Maine Affordable Housing Coalition. That organization, which also counts AARP Maine among its members, continues to look for ways to give more older Mainers a friendly and secure place to call home. ❖

**Opposite:** Barry Smith works on a painting at Seventy-Five State Street.

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