MOVING SOMEONE
LIVING WITH DEMENTIA

When Might a Move be Necessary?

Planning ahead creates more choice.



RECOGNIZING THE SHIFT

When the current plan may no longer work

Look at the overall pattern. Is the arrangement still safe, sustainable and meeting the person's needs?

- They are unsafe alone or experiencing wandering, falls or increased confusion.
- Meals, medication, hygiene or household tasks are no longer managed consistently.
- They need more supervision than family or home-care services can provide.
- The caregiver is exhausted or unwell.

PLANNING BEFORE CRISIS

Earlier planning protects options

Looking ahead does not commit anyone to moving. It gives the family time to understand the options before a crisis limits them.

PLAN TO LIMIT MULTIPLE MOVES

Each move requires the person to adjust to a new environment, routine and group of caregivers. This can increase confusion and may result in a change from their previous cognitive or functional baseline. When possible, choose a setting that can support the person now and adjust as their needs change.

THE EMOTIONAL WEIGHT

The promise made before dementia changed the circumstances

"I'll never put you in a nursing home."
"I promised I would take care of them."

These promises usually come from love, but often before anyone understands what dementia care may eventually require.

Families may imagine help with meals or appointments. They may not anticipate overnight supervision, wandering, resistance to care, incontinence or constant availability.

Reconsidering an earlier promise is not a betrayal.

The deeper promise was likely to keep the person safe and cared for. Guilt often means the caregiver wishes the circumstances were different. It does not automatically mean the decision is wrong.

WHAT TO ORGANIZE NOW

Understanding the basics, helps inform decisions.

- Start by understanding the person's care needs, finances, personality, routines, and likely future needs.

WHEN SHOULD WE BEGIN LOOKING?

How to Approach the Move

Planning ahead creates more choice.



UNDERSTANDING THE PATHWAYS

Dementia does not automatically mean long-term care

RETIREMENT LIVING

Privately paid residences offering different combinations of meals, personal care, nursing support, and memory care.

LONG-TERM CARE

Ontario's publicly funded system. Ontario Health at Home manages eligibility and placement. Wait times can be lengthy, and access is limited.

HOW INVOLVED SHOULD THE PERSON BE?

There is no single approach that works for everyone.

Someone in the early stages may be able to tour homes, share preferences, and participate meaningfully in the decision.

Someone with more advanced dementia may find tours, repeated conversations, or too many choices overwhelming.

Consider:

- Ability to understand and retain info.
- Does discussing the move cause distress
- Whether involving them supports meaningful participation, or places responsibility for a decision they may no longer have the capacity to make the decision.

WHEN COMPLETE HONESTY CAUSES HARM

Sometimes a person living with dementia cannot understand or retain why a move is necessary. Repeatedly telling them that they are leaving their home permanently may cause them to experience the news as a fresh loss each time.

Families may need to use **compassionate communication**, sometimes called **therapeutic fibbing or compassionate lying.**

The goal is not to mislead the person for convenience, but to reduce unnecessary distress when the information can no longer be understood or retained.

It is to reduce unnecessary fear when factual explanations are no longer helping them understand the situation.

This might mean saying:

- "You'll be staying here while we get some things sorted out."
- "The doctor wants you to have some extra support right now."

Focus on the emotion beneath the question.

Planning the Transition



PREPARING THE SUITE

For some people, it may be better to have the retirement residence prepare the suite with basic furnishings and bring familiar belongings over gradually.

The move may initially be presented as a respite stay, additional support, or a temporary arrangement

For others, arriving at a fully prepared suite may provide immediate familiarity. Family can set up the space in advance using recognizable furniture, bedding, photographs, and personal items.

Consider:

- Will seeing belongings removed from home create distress?
- Would participating in packing help them feel involved or make the move harder?
- Would a fully furnished suite feel reassuring or overwhelming?
- Which belongings are most likely to create comfort and recognition?

The goal is not to recreate the entire home. It is to create enough familiarity for the new space to begin feeling like their own.

PLANNING MOVE DAY

Whenever possible:

- Choose a time when the person is usually calmest
- Complete paperwork and practical arrangements beforehand
- Keep the number of people involved small
- Arrange for staff to be ready to welcome them
- Plan an immediate activity, meal, or introduction
- Avoid repeatedly explaining or defending the decision

Some families take the person to lunch or an activity while others prepare the suite. Other families arrive together and stay while the person becomes familiar with the space.

SHARE WHAT STAFF NEED TO KNOW

Before the move, provide staff with information about the person’s routines, preferences, relationships, sources of comfort, and common triggers.

Include what helps when the person becomes frightened, confused, or upset. This allows staff to begin building trust from the first day.

EXPECT AN ADJUSTMENT PERIOD

Supporting the Adjustment



A move may temporarily increase confusion, anxiety, anger, withdrawal, or sleep disruption.

The person may ask repeatedly to go home or become more resistant to care.

These changes do not automatically mean the placement has failed. The person is adjusting to an unfamiliar environment, new routines, and different caregivers.

Ask staff what they observe when family is not present. Someone may become upset when a family member leaves but settle shortly afterward.

VISITING DURING THE TRANSITION

There is no universal rule about how often family should visit. Some people benefit from frequent reassurance. Others find it harder to settle when every visit renews the expectation that they are leaving.

Consider:

- The person's best time of day
- Whether visits provide comfort or increase distress
- What staff observe before and after visits
- Whether shorter visits work better
- Whether an activity can give the visit a natural beginning and ending

Quality matters more than the length or frequency of the visit.

WHEN THEY ASK TO GO HOME

"Home" may represent more than a physical address.

They may be asking for familiarity, safety, belonging, or an earlier period in their life.

Instead of repeatedly explaining why they cannot return home:

- Acknowledge the feeling
- Offer reassurance
- Respond to the need beneath the question
- Redirect toward something familiar or comforting

You might say:

"You miss home. I know this feels unfamiliar. You're safe, and I'm here with you."

YOU DO NOT HAVE TO NAVIGATE THIS ALONE

The Dementia Society of Ottawa and Renfrew County supports people living with dementia and their caregivers through education, Dementia Care Coaches, support groups, and transition resources.

Tea & Toast helps families understand their housing options and manages the physical search, including recommendations, availability, pricing, tours, and move coordination.