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Buildings specializing in memory care fill growing need

By Jane Adler | Special to the Tribune

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As more families struggle to care for elders with memory impairments, new housing options are emerging to help.

Just ask Julie Cashman. Her 78-year-old mother, Ruth Hamilton, was diagnosed five years ago with dementia. She had been living alone in a condo but was having more trouble dealing with simple tasks, such as getting dressed.

Cashman convinced her mother to move to a retirement building, but the situation worsened. Cashman had to hire someone to watch her mother most of the day. And it soon became apparent that her mother needed round-the-clock care. "I knew she had to be in a locked building," so she wouldn't wander, said Cashman.

A mad scramble for housing began. But "I just couldn't imagine putting my mother in some of those places," said Cashman.

She finally found a new building called Autumn Leaves in [Vernon Hills](#). The building was under construction, so she toured another Autumn Leaves building already open in [Crystal Lake](#). It had private rooms in several clusters or neighborhoods circling common areas. An interior courtyard was locked and secure.

Most importantly, the building was meant only for those with memory problems. "I walked in and right away I felt it was the right fit," said Cashman, whose mother has lived at the Autumn Leaves building in Vernon Hills now for about six months.

As many as 5.2 million Americans have Alzheimer's disease, according to the Alzheimer's Association, and about 10 million Baby Boomers will develop Alzheimer's. About 50 percent to 70 percent of dementia cases are caused by Alzheimer's, the association says.

For years, most of those with severe memory problems have lived in nursing homes.

More recently, special memory-care facilities have emerged as an alternative.

The Alzheimer's Association is a good resource for families. The group's Web site, alz.org, has a search function to help locate facilities.