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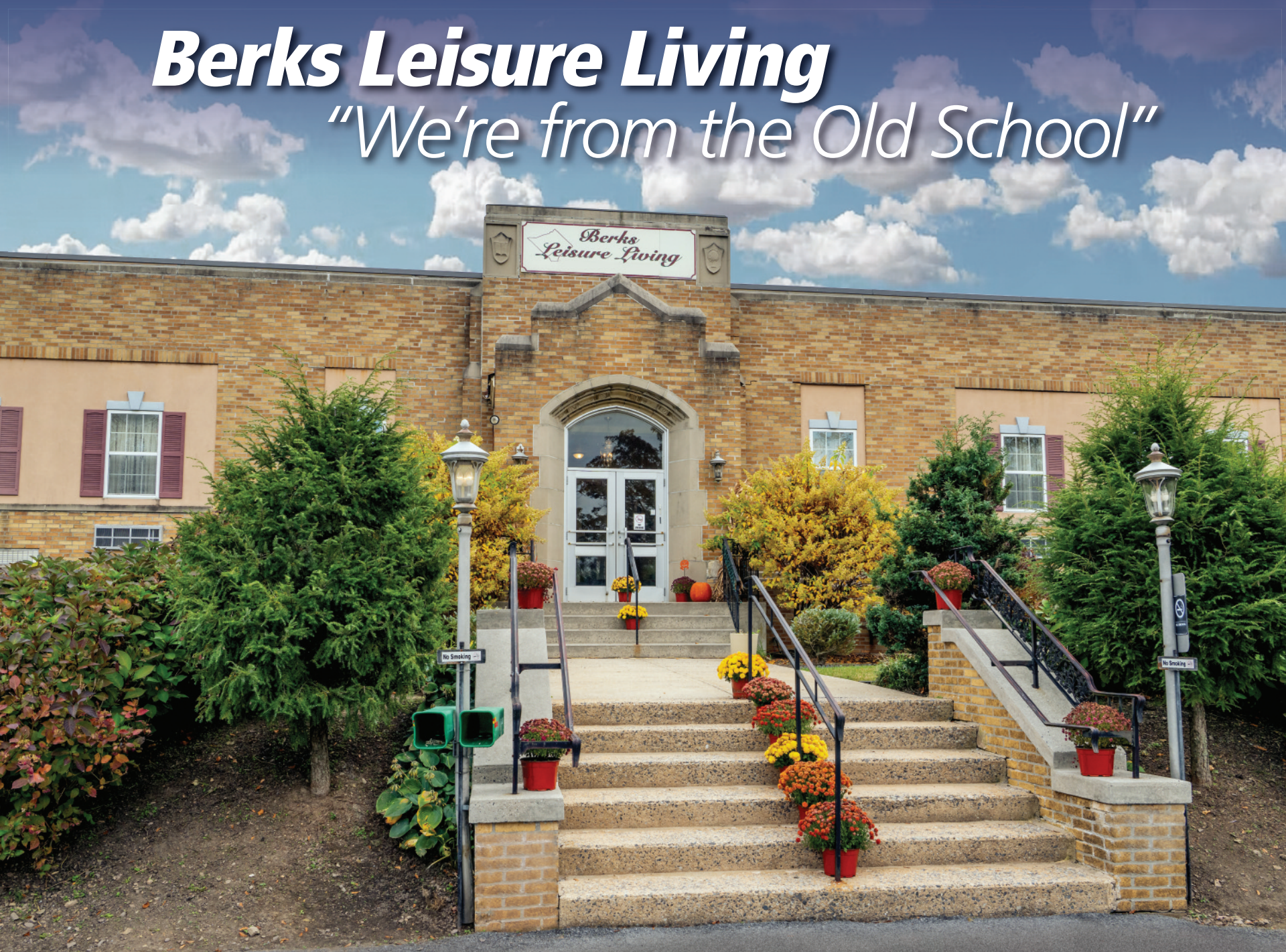
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# At Berks Leisure Living, YOU'RE FAMILY



PHOTOS BY STYLISH IMAGES



RAY MILLER

By Kathy Hunt

**W**hen family homes become too much to maintain, stairs too difficult to climb, and daily chores too taxing to complete, many older Americans contemplate the move to an assisted-living facility. Assisted living provides a fixed level of care to folks who need a bit of assistance with day-to-day activities but don't require skilled nursing. Generally, residents in assisted living have their own apartments or rooms with private baths, meal plans, and access to common areas for activities and socializing. On-site staff aid with personal care and medications, provide 24-hour supervision, and organize excursions in the surrounding communities.





## What's the difference between assisted living, nursing, and other care homes?

People often use the terms "assisted living" and "nursing home" interchangeably. However, according to the National Institute of Health and the National Institute on Aging, they are two separate categories of elder housing and care. Personal care and continuing care retirement communities are two other types with which people should become familiar.

A person who has moved into assisted living is someone who is fairly independent and does not require a great deal of assistance with daily activities, such as bathing, dressing, or eating. Usually, an assisted living facility will offer exercise, health, and wellness programs as well as at least one meal each day, transportation to and from appointments, medication assistance, and 24-hour supervision. Some specialize in housing people with specific diagnoses, such as Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia, intellectual disabilities, and diseases such as Parkinson's. All assisted living facilities work with outside health care providers to supply the following services: physical, occupational, and speech therapy; mental health screening and counseling; skilled nursing; dentistry; podiatry; pharmacy; and hospice. Assisted living facilities are not regulated by the government and the quality of care may vary as a result. Medicare and Medicaid will not pay for costs associated with assisted living.

Nursing homes focus more on medical care and are regulated by the federal government, which ensures some oversight of patient care. Although their residents are often elderly, nursing homes do accept younger people. Often, these individuals are recovering from a serious illness or injury and in need of skilled care. Nursing homes have licensed medical professionals on staff who provide round-the-clock care seven days per week. They accept private insurance, Medicaid, and Medicare. Due to their emphasis on medical care, nursing homes lack the cozy atmosphere of assisted living and tend to seem more like hospitals.

Smaller than an assisted living facility or nursing home, personal care homes usually have less than 20 residents. Also known as residential care facilities, group homes, or board and care homes, these private facilities give residents housing, personal care, meals, and 24-hour access to staff. Typically, personal care homes will not have medical or nursing care for their residents. Depending on the state, Medicaid or long-term care insurance may cover some of the costs of residing at a personal care home.

Sometimes referred to as life care communities, continuing care retirement communities have different levels of housing and care on their campuses. Residents may live independently in houses or apartments, driving, traveling, and going about their lives as if they still resided in their previous homes and neighborhoods. At some point, should they require more care, residents may transition into the community's assisted living or skilled nursing care buildings. The majority of these communities charge a substantial, one-time entrance fee and a monthly fee after that. Medicare, Medicaid, and long-term care insurance may cover some of the expenses of living at a continuing care retirement community.

## Long history of caring for the senior community

According to the Centers for Disease Control, in 2020, there were 30,577 assisted living facilities in the United States with approximately 1.2 million licensed beds and approximately 819,000 residents. Women accounted for almost 70 percent of this population. Overall, more the half of all residents were over the age of 85.

In Pennsylvania, there are 68 assisted living facilities, including Berks Leisure Living at 1399 Fairview Drive in Leesport, Berks County. Situated on ten lush acres, the one-story, brick building first opened its doors in 1931 to the students of Bern Elementary School. In 1998, the school was sold and underwent extensive renovations before opening in 2002 as Berks Leisure Living. The facility's unique location inspired its tagline, "We're from the old school." Today, the 36,000-square-foot assisted living facility has 36 private and semi-private units with 41 residents. It is licensed to have up to 49 occupants. Residents range in age from 70 to 90 and above, but, at present, one person under the age of 60 calls Berks Leisure Living home.

Berks Leisure Living has a straightforward mission "to improve the quality of life for residents and their families," said Ray Miller, founder of and partner in Berks Leisure Living. "We provide personal care with a personal touch. We're like family. We're here to help."

A veteran of the elder care industry, Miller has worked in this field for over 50 years. "I bought a house at 1216 Perkiomen Avenue in Reading, in 1970, and converted it into assisted living," Miller said. "It was Miller Personal Care Home. This was before they had rules and regulations or even something called assisted living. My son just sold it earlier this year." He added that he was a charter member of the Personal Care Providers Association.

Along with renovating what would become Miller Personal Care Home, Miller had purchased and refashioned The Villa Saint Elizabeth as an assisted living facility. Situated on eight-and-a-half acres, the Villa Saint Elizabeth is 42,000-square-foot Victorian mansion on Museum Road in West Reading.

"This was the most beautiful, best mansion around because the owner was the treasurer of the Berkshire Knitting Mills and one of the richest people around," Miller said. He subsequently sold the Villa Saint Elizabeth in 1972.

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## COVER STORY

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Bern Elementary School's sprawling grounds, history in the community, and potential for assisted living inspired Miller to purchase the site. "When I'd tell friends about buying it, so many would say, 'Oh, I have good memories of that place. I went to school there,'" he said.

When it came to refurbishing the school building, Miller and his business partner Rose Bechtel were extremely hands-on. "Rose would get up on ladders and take shutters off. She would clean chandeliers. She was a hard worker and really would do everything," he said.

Miller named Berks Leisure Living's Rose wing in Bechtel's honor and the Maria wing in memory of her sister Maria, who had worked as an aid at the facility. He chose "Calvin" as the third wing's name; Calvin is his middle name.

### Services available at Berks Leisure Living

Years of experience in elder care have given Miller insight into what people enjoy and need in senior housing. As one might expect from an assisted living facility, Berks Leisure Living provides residents with three nutritious meals each day, all prepared in the facility's commercial kitchen and made with consideration of dietary restrictions. It has personal laundry service and cleaning and housekeeping. It offers medication management, transportation to and from



appointments, in-house podiatry and psychiatry visits, and help with bathing, dressing, hygiene, eating, and mobility. All rooms are wheelchair accessible and cable-ready. Residents pay a monthly fee for private cable TV. All rooms come fully furnished. However, residents who wish to bring their own furniture will be accommodated.

For a fee of \$125 per day, Berks Leisure Living provides respite care to families in the Leesport-Reading area. Respite care enables primary care givers to take a brief break from tending to a loved one's daily health and personal care needs. The reasons for requesting respite care vary. A primary care giver may be unavailable or away for a short period, or their loved one may need extra support while recovering from an illness, injury, or surgery. Depending on the facility, respite care can last for as little as a few hours or for as long as a few weeks.

For emergencies, Penn State Health-St. Joseph Medical Center in Reading is only ten minutes away. Presently, Berks Leisure Living does not have memory care or behavioral health units.

Life at Berks Leisure Living includes more than just health and personal care. Entertainment and lifestyle amenities likewise play a large role in resident's lives. Community outings, bingo, exercise classes, and nondenominational religious services are all part of an active lifestyle at Berks Leisure Living. Additionally, for the residents' convenience, the facility has a hair salon on site.

### Unique and homey atmosphere for an affordable price

"The best way to explain Berks Leisure Living is to come see it for yourself," Miller said. Prospective residents are welcome to stop by at their convenience or call to arrange a tour of the facility.

In addition to viewing the rooms, social areas, and grounds, visitors can observe a bit of local history. Throughout Berks Leisure Living, Miller has placed an assortment of antiques and collectibles on display. In the Rose wing, one encounters a surprising delight — over a dozen antique organs.







## Making the transition to assisted living smoother

No matter at what stage of life you are, packing your belongings and moving into a new home can seem overwhelming. Moving while also giving up a degree of personal independence can be especially challenging. To ease the transition from independent to assisted living, gerontology experts agree — advance planning is key. People should not wait for a crisis to arise to consider what assisted living facility will best meet their or their loved one's needs. For a smoother transition, they should take the time to research, tour, and talk to the staff at several assisted living facilities. They should ask about staff ratio, training, and retention, as well as the facility's services, activities, and policies. Another important question concerns upfront costs, regular monthly expenses, and any hidden fees. People should also talk to and learn about the occupants with whom their loved one or they will spend much of their time. Ultimately, people should gather enough information to make a sound decision about assisted living and a smoother transition to this next stage of life.

The National Institute of Health also advises the following:

- Get to know the facility's staff so that your loved one does not move to a place filled with strangers. A good rapport with staff can help make the transition to assisted living much easier.

Advocate for your loved ones' preferences.

- Check in regularly to see how your loved one is coping in the new environment and whether adequate attention and care is being received.

- Share your or your loved one's feelings of loss or guilt with a social worker or mental health professional. Having emotional support will aid in adjusting to assisted living.

"I'm an auction man and that's where I got them," Miller said. "There are two barrel organs in the Rose wing's hall. These are something like a fair would have for a merry-go-round. And I have about 15 pump organs. It's an attraction for people who visit."

At one time, the Calvin wing showcased collections of Hess toy trucks and antique bottles. Currently, the basement exhibits old photographs and art prints on its walls.

The cost of residing in such a distinctive setting is considerably less than the national or state average. In 2021, the national monthly median cost of assisted living was \$4,500 while Pennsylvania's monthly median cost was \$3,955. The cost of a private room in

the Calvin wing is \$3,060 per month. In the Marie wing, a private room goes for \$2,940 a month while in the Rose wing, it costs \$2,730 per month. Semi-private, which has two residents sharing a room, is \$2,520 per month in the Calvin wing while in the Marie wing, it's \$2,400 per month. A Rose wing semi-private room is \$2,250 per month. There are also rooms available for those with limited resources.

**For additional information about Berks Leisure Living, visit [www.berksleisure.com](http://www.berksleisure.com) or call 610.916.8833 from Monday through Friday, 8:00 AM to 4:30 PM. Berks Leisure Living is located at 1399 Fairview Drive in Leesport, Pennsylvania.**

