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The Washington Post

Downsizing during retirement can be draining. Pros can help.

The physical and emotional work of dismantling a home can be outsourced to a growing sector of senior move managers

By Amanda Long

February 9, 2023 at 7:00 a.m. EST

When you move out of a house you've lived in for 43 years and raised three children in, you're bound to discover plenty: multiple sets of china and crystal, dusty camping gear, enough sporting equipment to field several teams, dolls and their dwellings — even boxes of dirty socks and underwear your teenage sons hid in the attic when asked to clean their rooms.

But the most important thing that Roger and Kathy Estes discovered about moving out of their 1,700-square-foot Arlington, Va., home is that they simply could not do it alone. They needed help. “I was just baffled by how to even start, you know? I knew that we had a lot of things we wanted to give away or throw away, but I didn't know what to do first,” said Kathy, 75, a retired financial clerk. The couple didn't want to rely on their three adult children, all of whom live at least an hour away and have full lives and families.

“Forty-three years of life don't just pack themselves up in a weekend,” said Roger, 73, a retired detective. Many aging baby boomers find themselves overwhelmed and understaffed when confronting the daunting task of figuring out where to spend their final years. Dismantling a home filled with possessions from the past few decades can be emotionally difficult.

“Having that conversation about moving is super hard on everyone. It's hard on the children, it's hard between siblings, and it's especially hard on parents,” said Jennifer Pickett, co-executive director of the National Association of Senior and Specialty Move Managers (NASMM).

Many families facing the emotional, logistical and physical stresses of such a transition are outsourcing the project to a growing sector of professionals. Senior move managers, downsizing professionals, estate agents and, to some extent, geriatric-care managers act as general contractors on the massive project that is moving a lifetime of memories and heavy furniture. If they can't pack the piano, discover and auction the treasures, or sort and incinerate the stacks of files, then they probably know someone who can.

The screenshot shows the top portion of a Washington Post article. At the top, the newspaper's name 'The Washington Post' is visible, along with the author's name 'leighborghesani' and a search icon. Below this is a navigation bar with 'Home & Garden' selected, and other categories like 'Essential cleaning supplies', 'Timeless paint colors', and 'Low-maintenance house'. The main title of the article is 'Downsizing during retirement can be draining. Pros can help.' Below the title is a sub-headline: 'The physical and emotional work of dismantling a home can be outsourced to a growing sector of senior move managers'. The byline reads 'By Amanda Long' and the date is 'February 9, 2023 at 7:00 a.m. EST'. A colorful illustration depicts a person in a blue uniform moving boxes from a truck to a house. Below the illustration are social media sharing icons for Listen, Comment, Save, Gift Article, and Share. A small caption reads '(Also Crusher/illustration for The Washington Post)'. The beginning of the article text is visible at the bottom of the screenshot: 'When you move out of a house you've lived in for 43 years and raised three children in, you're bound to discover plenty: multiple sets of china and crystal, dusty camping gear, enough sporting equipment to field several teams, dolls and their dwellings — even boxes of dirty socks and underwear your teenage sons hid in the attic when asked to clean their rooms.'

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They also act as professional listeners and stress buffers, reminding adult children that this is a time of loss and mourning for their parents, and they provide creative ways to hold on to memories without filling a moving van full of teacup collections and tool chests.

“At any age, any transition is scary. Especially when you’re older, all you really want is someone to hold your hand and say: ‘We’ve got this. We can handle it,’” said Lori James, owner of Alexandria, Va.-based Ararity, which offers downsizing and organizational services, hauling and more. Since 2005, James and her team have handled some 20,000 transitions for families in the D.C. area and Delaware.

Senior move managers charge about \$60 to \$80 an hour, according to NASMM; geriatric-care managers go for about \$80 to \$200 an hour, because they often manage medical care and tasks beyond the move.

The Estesés’ move involved emptying their three-bedroom home (and basement, garage and attic). They turned to Cris Sgrott, a senior move manager and downsizing pro with Organizing Maniacs, for help. Roger and Kathy spent \$11,000 for about 15 days of Organizing Maniacs’ services; junk removal cost another \$2,000.

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The value, say those who have relied on senior move managers, is clear once you factor in the time, expertise and strength required. “If we hadn’t hired an expert, we’d still be sitting in that house in Arlington, staring at our crystal and throwing our hands up in defeat,” Kathy said. Whether you take advantage of a free consultation, hire someone for one day or several, or decide to do it yourselves, you can learn from professionals, parents and adult children who have been there and moved that.

Start planning now

The biggest mistake is underestimating how much time a senior move can take, says Dominique Tervene of Caring

Transitions. Early planning lessens the frantic situation families often find themselves in when parents are forced to move.

“The earlier you start, the more natural the conversation becomes, and the less likely you are to be forced into making decisions in a crisis,” said Carol Bradley Bursack, author of “Minding Our Elders” and blogger on the site of the same name. When scouting senior move managers and moving companies, “you want to look for compassion and experience,” Tervene says, adding: “Are they rushing through the consult? Are they listening? Do they have insurance?”

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For adult children, pay particular attention to how your parents are addressed and involved in the consultation. Senior move managers stress that they heed the preferences of those moving, not those who are paying.

And don't assume retirees have to move. If people want to age in place, there are plenty of resources on the process of adapting a home for that. A good place to start is with AARP's HomeFit Guide, which has information regarding potential safety hazards and upgrades.

Set a budget

Sources quoted prices ranging from \$2,000 to \$20,000 for moving assistance. If the budget is limited, outsource just the most difficult task. Have frank conversations with family members about what time and/or money they plan to contribute. Don't assume the sales of china and a dining room set are going to help defray the costs; you

have to find out how much the items are really worth.

James, whose company has an auction house, encourages clients to look on eBay and other auction websites to see the going rates of pieces. Photograph items, and use Google Images to find price tags. "Make no assumptions," she says. "Everything is cyclical." (She once handed a \$20,000 check to a client who thought his slightly damaged grandfather clock was worthless.)

Don't assume your kids want your stuff

"We had these dishes and furniture from days gone by that we thought that they would like. Well, I'm here to tell you the children of that age don't do that anymore," says Roger about what he calls the Ikea generation's interior design preferences. "They don't want our stuff. Period."

Have honest conversations about

what, if anything, relatives want and how and when they'll move it. James often reminds clients that donating items often makes more financial sense than trying to sell them.

Warning: Emotional reality checks lie ahead

Roger never expected a tent to be his emotional Waterloo, but when he realized the couple's camping days were behind them, he needed a minute. Sgrott, the senior move manager, sprang into action. "She said, 'I'll just take this right down to the Salvation Army, no problem,'" Roger says. "Now, I don't know if she did that or not, but she offered, and she did it, leaving no room for me to sit around and ruminate that we're never going to be able to go camping again."

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