



Assisted Living in Washington a Cornerstone of Care

Who Relies on Assisted Living?

Nearly 40,000 Washingtonians currently reside in assisted living (AL), and the state's older adult population is projected to double by 2035. Assisted living is a preferred option for people who want to maintain independence, but for whom living at home is no longer safe or sustainable.

Assisted living plays a critical **prevention** role – helping avoid hospitalizations, injuries, and deaths that can occur when older adults live alone without adequate support. Residents typically have complex health needs: on average, they take 12–15 medications daily, and 85% rely on medication assistance to avoid overdoses or missing life-sustaining medications.

People are also entering assisted living **later in life** and with higher needs. More than half of residents are age 85 or older, and over half have a diagnosed Alzheimer's or dementia-related condition. With 24/7 supervision and daily personal care—such as help with bathing, walking, dressing, toileting, and transferring—residents can safely live at their highest level of functioning. This support significantly reduces preventable risks, including falls, unintentional fires, and medication errors.

Assisted living provides a **holistic environment** that supports quality of life. Residents benefit from private apartments, utilities and internet, housekeeping, social services, personalized and group activities, transportation and medical appointment coordination, nutritious meals and snacks, and when appropriate, nursing services and memory care—subject to new certification standards adopted by the Legislature in 2025.

In short, assisted living serves Washington's most vulnerable older adults by ensuring safety, dignity, social connection, and the supports needed to age well.

Looking Ahead to a Growing Need



558

Total Licensed Facilities



40,000

Total Residents



32,000

Total Jobs



\$3.74 Billion

Total Economic Activity
(direct/indirect)



\$418 Million

Total Annual Tax Revenue



What Does an Assisted Living Facility Look Like?



Assisted living communities are **purpose-built environments designed for older adults**, emphasizing safety, comfort, and independence. Facilities are required to meet specific standards for their physical layout and amenities, including features that reduce risk and support daily living.



These communities include **common areas, outdoor spaces, and private meeting rooms** where residents can gather with family and friends. Individual units are typically private, often with kitchenettes, and are equipped with **bathrooms, emergency call systems, and fire and life safety protections**.



Every element – from the building design to the quality-of-life amenities – is intentionally developed to create a safe, supportive, and accessible home for aging residents.



Who Provides Care in Assisted Living?

Washington's assisted living communities employ **32,000 individuals**, more than half of whom are direct care staff, including nursing assistants, personal care aides, and licensed nurses. These communities also rely on a broad team of professionals who support daily operations, including staff in dietary services, housekeeping, maintenance, administration, and facility operations.



Who Pays for Assisted Living?

Most residents pay for assisted living privately, while some rely on Medicaid. However, **Medicaid covers only 82% of the actual cost of care**, and because care levels, staffing, and safety requirements are set by law, providers cannot reduce services to match the lower rate. The result is that the funding gap is shifted onto private-pay residents through higher prices.



In Washington, this insufficient Medicaid investment directly affects access for low-income seniors. Worker wages cannot keep up with the broader healthcare market when Medicaid pays far below actual costs, making it harder for providers to recruit and retain staff. As a result, assisted living has become increasingly **unaffordable for middle-income families** and **inaccessible for low-income seniors**, forcing providers to manage Medicaid access carefully.



By contrast, other home- and community-based providers, such as adult family homes, receive Medicaid reimbursement rates that cover **95% of their actual costs** – far closer to market rates.

Growing Needs and Barriers

In 2020, Washington had **131,000 residents aged 85 and older**. By 2035, that number is expected to more than double, and the rate of increase will only grow from there. Our most elderly population will exceed **519,000 by the year 2050**. Over the coming years, there will be a growing need in communities across the state for a growing investment in long-term care, including assisted living.

At the same time, there are persistent workforce challenges that create barriers to accessing care. With a median age of 43 (and over 25% at 55 or older), the assisted living workforce in Washington is aging alongside the residents. **The workforce is also shrinking**. The long-term care sector struggles to compete for workers with other service sectors that don't require such taxing, physically demanding work. Certification and training requirements also contribute to workforce barriers. Direct care workers in Washington assisted living facilities must complete 75 hours of mandatory training and 12 hours of continuing education annually. Washington's testing and certification system for the home care aides and nursing assistants employed in assisted living does not provide timely licensure, leading to job loss and loss of potential workers.

Inflation is exacerbating concerns about the already high cost of care in our state. As costs for assisted living have grown significantly in recent years, so do barriers to accessing care. Increased staffing and operating costs (wages, benefits, food, utilities, insurance, licensing fees and taxes) are driving costs for moderate-income people who do not qualify for Medicaid, and who may not be able to self-pay indefinitely because they rely on limited savings, pensions, and Social Security.

Opportunities for Greater Access to Care Through Assisted Living

Assisted living offers a **cost-effective, community-based care model** that allows Washington to serve more people with fewer workers. Labor, which accounts for about 70% of assisted living costs is more efficient in a congregate setting as staffing is shared across multiple residents. Nursing staff can oversee and manage care for several residents at once. Because no travel time is required, labor hours are fully productive. Assisted living communities also provide residents with opportunities for meaningful socialization and family engagement, contributing to a higher quality of life and better long-term care outcomes.

How Can the Legislature Help?

To ensure older adults can access the care they need when they need it, Washington must pair sustained investments with strategic policy decisions that strengthen the long-term viability of assisted living. This includes Medicaid funding that aligns with the true cost of care and accounts for inflationary pressures. Strengthening Medicaid rates and modernizing policy frameworks will stabilize the workforce and expand access for low- and moderate-income seniors, ensuring assisted living remains an essential and accessible part of Washington's continuum of care.