

Rumi matches individuals who have a disability with compatible caregiver-roommate

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Blake Elliott, 38, has worked in disability services for 10 years, but his training began earlier. In 2003, his then 16-year-old brother suffered a

traumatic brain injury in a car crash and has required 24-hour care since. He's received that care in-home but Elliott knows that most people with disabilities—whether they require minor daily supervision or full-time care—aren't that lucky. So Elliott, of Minneapolis, developed a technology service, Rumi, that matches individuals who have a disability waiver with a compatible caregiver-roommate who provides a designated level of care. Elliott, vice president of operations for Rumi's parent company, Bridges MN, explains why he feels the timing is right for Rumi.

Q: You created Rumi (meetmyrumi.com) to fill a need. What was it?

A: Until about 1980, we cared for people in state institutions and state hospitals, which were very segregated and expensive. Mom or dad might have to drive to a different city to visit their child, who typically lived in that setting until he or she passed away. A massive movement began in the 1980s toward more home- and community-based settings, particularly the four-person group homes. There are now about 19,000 licensed beds in group home settings in Minnesota and they are a significant improvement over the institutionalized setting. People can live in community and the cost is reduced.

Q: I hear a "but" in your voice.

A: But vacancies for group home beds are extremely scarce, which means families must look far and wide for an opening. What we see all the time is their loved one moved to a community where they've never been, with three people they don't know. With Rumi, we're trying to give people with disabilities more options. Let's blow the doors off this system and give people this radically different system. Besides, the timing is right. We're living in a sharing economy.

Q: I'm guessing safety is the No. 1 concern for the applicant and the applicant's family. This isn't just a coffee date out in the open. This person is moving in 24/7.

A: We get this all the time. We all should be worried about safety. After potential caregivers fill out their profile, two public background checks are run and then a third, following Department of Human Services standards. There's an interview. There are five, six, seven face-to-face meetings and no names or photographs shared until there is an agreed-upon mutual connection. And our team is in place to offer continued quality assurance. It's an in-depth process.

Q: How does Rumi deal with the scarcity of housing options?

A: About 15% of the time, the caregiver has housing. Fifteen% of the time, the person with disabilities has housing. And 70% of the time, Bridges helps them find an apartment. They split rent like traditional roommates. We've developed relationships with landlords and affordable housing advocates who are interested in what we are doing.

Q: What kind of response is your marketing getting, mostly on buses?

A: We have 750 profiles in our system; 600 are interested caregivers and 150 are people with disabilities. That ratio gives the person with a disability a lot of choice in terms of who he or she might decide to live with. From what felt like a powerless system before, they can feel a lot of power. Of that number, 225 individuals are currently in the matching process. Our first "match"—Greg and Yanni, who are featured on our

website—live together in South St. Paul in a single family home. Greg goes to a day program.

Q: Why the strong interest among caregivers?

A: This is not a market-driven system. Caregivers make about \$12.50 an hour, which means about \$21,000 annually in take-home pay. No wonder the national turnover rate is more than 50%. At Rumi, we can pay up to \$43,500 a year, tax-free, for 40-hour-a-week workers. We're trying to find those great, mission-driven people, pay them well and help them start living more full lives. An added bonus: Many tell us they hate coming home to an empty house. Now they don't have to.

Q: Tax-free?

A: Since Rumi is a service that connects two people who live in their own home on their own lease (and not in a group home or institutionalized setting), the income to the care provider is tax-free, provided several conditions are met, which are explained on our website, meetmyrumi.com. Remember to also consult your tax professional.

Q: Must caregivers work full-time?

A: No. They can work 10 or 20 hours a week. They can work a second job, have a spouse and child, or pet.

Q: How might that social network impact the person with disabilities?

A: He or she has instant social connections with a roommate's friends, family, family dog or cat. It has a positive ripple effect.

Q: What if the arrangement doesn't work out?

A: Like any roommate situation, sometimes it just doesn't work out. We ask for 60 days' notice. We have a lot of resources to help in those situations.

Q: Where does the name Rumi come from?

A: Rumi is a play on "roomie," as in "roommate"—and it's pronounced just like "roomie." Rumi is also a 13th-century poet and scholar who famously said: "What you seek is seeking you." We feel the same way about the Rumi platform

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