

RETIREMENT LIVING

It Takes a Village to Help the Aging

AS ALL OF us age, we face a difficult

choice: Should I stay in my home, or move to a senior community or perhaps an assisted-living facility? Now a growing number of neighborhood networks are providing the resources to help the elderly remain independent for as long as possible.

These self-help communities, often known as villages, offer seniors links to home-care agencies and other professionals. More important, they provide the small, inexpensive services that can mean the difference between people staying in their own homes and leaving: help with minor repairs, a ride to the doctor, someone who can pick up a carton of milk or a neighbor who simply stops by to say hello.

A few years ago, Ruth Randall borrowed a walker to help her get around after a fall. Once she was steady on her feet, she needed someone to return the device. So she called a fellow member of Community Without Walls in Princeton, N.J., who happily did her the favor.

Today, Randall, who is in her seventies, is president of the organization, which has 450 members divided into six smaller communities, called "houses." Dues range from \$15 to \$30 a year.

The Princeton community was started in 1992 by four friends who were beginning to think about how they could help each other as they aged. They told other neighbors and attracted 80 people to their first planning meeting. By now, Randall says, the group has become "a virtual retirement community."

"As people get old, their networks of support diminish," Randall says. "This is an attempt to develop new networks so people will know and help each other. The whole point is to keep people at home." (Learn more about Community Without Walls by clicking "Support/Seniors" at

www.princetonol.com/groups

Village People Look to Volunteers

The Princeton community depends almost entirely on volunteers. Able-bodied seniors help those who are frailer. Aid can be as modest as dropping off a walker or providing a ride to the train station. Or it can be as intensive as organizing meals and providing moral support for a friend gravely ill with cancer.

Much of the community-building is informal.

A few members regularly go bird watching. Others created a small theater group. When someone needs assistance, he or she can contact one of the six community houses. Most often, they just call a friend they have met through the group.

For those who need professional care, Community Without Walls has developed a relationship with a local nonprofit, which will conduct an assessment of a member's needs and then develop a care plan. The organization coordinates home care, transportation and other services, and provides access to a 24-hour-a-day emergency hotline. The program costs members \$250 for one person or \$340 for a couple, not including fees for the individual services.

While the Princeton program depends on volunteers, Beacon Hill Village in the tony Boston enclave relies more on paid staff and professional resources. Created in the 1990s, Beacon Hill Village (www.beaconhillvillage.org), whose members are 50 and older, was among the first of such neighborhood networks.

Members of Beacon Hill Village, who pay dues of about \$650 annually, can call the village office, where staffers will refer them to preapproved, high-quality vendors, from plumbers to tax experts, and will arrange to have a dog walked, a meal prepared or pictures hung. Most services cost money, although some volunteer assistance is available. Like the Princeton community, Beacon Hill Village arranges social activities, such as exercise programs and lectures.

Beacon Hill has spawned dozens of similar efforts nationwide. In Washington, D.C., Capitol Hill Village has been operating for a year and has about 230 members. Dues are \$500 annually for singles and \$750 for couples. The village receives about 50 requests for services each month.

Like Beacon Hill, Capitol Hill Village (www.capitolhillvillage.org) provides concierge services, where members get referrals for preapproved contractors and

professional services. Capitol Hill also has a contract with a local home health agency that provides nurse's aides, homemakers and other personal-service helpers. Executive Director Gail Kohn says her biggest surprise has been the willingness of members to volunteer. She says that about half of the group's requests for help have been answered by other members. Volunteers sign up ahead of time. If the office gets a call from a member who needs help, a volunteer on the list will be called.

In Reston, Va., elder-care activist Steve Gurney is looking to try something different: a multigenerational cooperative organization. "I don't want this to be age exclusive," he says. "As they grow up, I want my two- and five-year-olds to see we are helping elders in the neighborhood, so they will see this is how people are taking care of each other." Gurney is trying to build his organization on the model of Neighborhood Watch groups, where the entire community shares in fighting crime. His ambition is for neighbors and members of community groups to care for those who need help, whether it is day care for a child or home care for a frail senior.

Beyond the Neighborhoods

So far, most of these communities have been built around physical neighborhoods. But they're also developing through churches, synagogues or fraternal organizations. One example is the Masons in Ohio, which have operated homes for widows since the 19th century. In recent years, these homes have evolved into modern retirement communities. Now several Masonic lodges in the state want to help elderly members or their widows stay at home. The initiative, called I-Care, calls on volunteers who help senior Masons and their widows with basic chores, such as changing light bulbs or mowing lawns. Sometimes, says volunteer John Mullinger, "a coat of paint on a shutter is the difference between being able to live on your own or not." I-Care also provides paid services, such as nurse's aides. Recipients say the program has been invaluable. "Having I-Care help me out has been a tremendous relief," says Betty Wise, a widow who lives in a farmhouse in Morrow, Ohio. I-Care put up storm windows, did some painting and fixed her barn. Wise says the help has enabled her to stay on her farm. Even the federal government has gotten in the act. It has funded about 40 naturally occurring retirement

communities, known as **NORCs**. These are apartment buildings or neighborhoods where large numbers of seniors live. While the villages are started at the grass roots by neighbors, **NORCs** usually are created by local nonprofit groups. The **NORC** projects have been popular with users, although government funding has been drying up.

Villages and **NORCs** are invaluable for those needing limited assistance. But volunteers are not the answer for those who are very frail and may need regular help eating or bathing. Cost is also an issue. Capitol Hill's Kohn believes that most of these groups cannot survive on fees of \$500 or so. But as dues increase, the villages fear losing members, especially those who are living on modest incomes. For more information on starting your own village, check www.agingincommunity.com, which has links to about 15 neighborhood networks. Beacon Hill Village sells a detailed manual on how to replicate its model. The manual includes advice on developing a business plan, raising funds and creating a board. κ

—HOWARD GLECKMAN