

The New “Village Movement”: A Model for Building Supportive Communities for Older Adults

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As we age, the comfort and security of home becomes even more significant. Research repeatedly reveals that most Americans prefer to remain in their own homes through retirement and older age: There really is “no place like home.”

However, people’s needs evolve with age. Elders, especially those with chronic medical conditions or disabilities, require a strong support system that can provide access to a variety of services from the basics of buying food and getting to medical appointments to finding a handyman to fix the leaky faucet.

New models for alternative living arrangements

The first Village, started in 2000 in Boston’s Beacon Hill neighborhood, was born of the older community members’ wish to age at home with access to supports and services needed to live in comfort, safety and

security (www.beaconhillvillage.org). Since then, the concept has grown now to include many variations on “community” village model. Each community is different, consumer driven and empowered by a unique intent, which drives services and structure. Whatever their structure and means of support, villages are definitely grassroots organizations and there is no one set business model. They reflect the kind of support available and the membership itself.

It “takes a village” to sustain each model. It is vital to the health and longevity of these communities to find and maintain local and national partners to sustain and grow them. One particularly creative concept is that of “time banking”, where volunteers contribute expertise and time to help a fellow community member, and “bank” that time for later reciprocal service.

Villages are being established notably as self-governing, community-based organizations, developed with the sole purpose of enabling people to remain in their own homes. But the

purpose is beyond that. Villages are not just about staying home, but being able to remain living a community. The village model is a vital addition to the existing kaleidoscope of Long Term Care Options and can improve service access, build community and enhance elders functioning, quality of life and overall capacity.

Baby boomers will be looking for novel ways to grow old and stay independent. Many of us will find this an attractive alternative to Active Adult Communities. Similar to the “communes” of the 60’s and early 70’s the future appears bright for the Village Movement, but there are challenges: How best to sustain and support these communities, How to possibly integrate them within larger communities? What will be the comprehensive services available? Only time will tell if the Village Movement will grow and provide meaningful, viable options for older persons to age in place all over America. If Villages are successful, then we will be the pioneers in a movement that will be tailored to meet our needs as we age.”

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