

AARP Bulletin Online February 13, 2006
Long-Term Care

Declaration of Independents

Home is where you want to live forever. Here's how.

By Barbara Basler
December 2005

Suzanne Stark, 79, lives in a book-lined apartment in central Boston's lovely Beacon Hill neighborhood. Independent and active, the author and freelance writer nevertheless acknowledges there are times when problems arise and she needs help. Like when her beloved cat Zenobia became suddenly, violently ill, and Stark couldn't get her into a carrier to take her to the veterinarian.

"I tried everything, and then I called Beacon Hill Village," she says. "I said, 'I know this is weird, but can you send someone to help me get this cat in the carrier?' And they did."

Beacon Hill Village is a revolutionary, all-encompassing concierge service created by residents who want to grow old in the homes they have lived in for years.

Now, they can do that, confident that even as they age they can deal with almost any contingency, large or small, without relying on relatives or friends. To preserve their independence, they can turn to the village, as the nonprofit association is known, which helps its 320 members find virtually any service they need—from 24-hour nursing care to help with a wayward cat, often at a discounted fee.

Their innovation is so appealing that a national expert on aging at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology asserts it could well change the way American, and the rest of the world, grow old. "The assisted living and the die-with-a-golf-club-in-your-hand communities had better take notice," says Joseph Coughlin, director of the MIT Age Lab, a think tank on aging.

This fresh concept is already attracting attention far beyond the quaint cobblestone walkways of Beacon Hill. In the three years since it started, the village has received more than 200 inquiries from places as diverse as Manhattan and Las Vegas.

The group's grassroots creators are now writing a how-to manual so others can replicate the village in their own neighborhoods. And MIT is working on a plan of the concept that could be used around the world.

"With Beacon Hill Village you have life, you don't have retirement," Coughlin says. The village not only links members to carefully vetted personal trainers, caterers, house cleaners, plumbers and computer advisers, it also offers them a number of free benefits such as weekly car service to the grocery. Other free benefits include monthly lectures by notable Bostonians, exercise classes and special health clinics - all activities that take place in neighborhood churches, schools and a community center.

The village hasn't yet had a request it couldn't help fill, says Judy Willett, the social worker hired to direct the association and its two other full-time employees. "We even had a member in the hospital call and ask us to find someone to pick up her betting slips at the track. And we did," she says.

"We wanted everything you'd find in a retirement community or assisted living, but we wanted these services in our own homes," explains Susan McWhinney-Morse, 72, the president of Beacon Hill Village, who was one of the 12 residents who helped create it. "We didn't want to leave the neighborhood we love."

Village founder and member J. Atwood "Woody" Ives, 69, says, "Even the places they call active retirement communities tend to be depressing. They're so artificial; everybody there is old."

But, he says, by staying in his own neighborhood, "I see college students, couples, young families, old people. There is a great mix here, and I think that adds to the quality of life."

Any neighborhood resident age 50 or older can join the village. Its members include retirees in their 90s as well as working people in their 50s and 60s.

"The younger ones join because they like the convenience of our services or they need help caring for a parent who lives with them," Willett says. "They want to support Beacon Hill Village, make sure it will be there as they age."

Membership costs \$550 a year per person, \$750 a year per couple and \$100 a year for lower-income residents, who also get a \$250 credit toward services. And the village has people who charge as little as \$15 an hour for odd jobs.

The woman the village sent to help Suzanne Stark with Zenobia spent all afternoon with them driving Stark and her cat to the vet, waiting, then driving them to the animal hospital and finally home. "That saved Zenobia's life," Stark says. The cost of the service: \$35.

In many cases remaining at home and using the village's à la carte services is much cheaper than assisted living, Willett says. If, however, someone becomes ill enough to need 24-hour care or other expensive services, the total costs probably will equal those of a nursing home, "but with one big difference: You are in your own home."

Village employees not only provide information and referrals, they telephone members to check that each job was completed satisfactorily.

Although members are entitled to highly personalized attention, the tiny staff operating out of a one-room neighborhood office, has never been overwhelmed because only about a third of the members call the village frequently. Another third use it now and then, while the remainder draw mainly on its social offerings - lectures, weekly lunches in a local restaurant and day trips to places like the Newport Jazz Festival.

"The social aspect is the secret sauce here," says MIT's Coughlin. "Just bringing services to your door doesn't ensure a good life. People, especially older people living alone, need to be engaged, they need reasons to go out, to be a part of a community. And the village works to give them that."

The core group of 12 residents laid the groundwork for the project with meticulous research, drawing up a business plan, vetting and recruiting a number of businesses and health providers, all of them eager to have a reliable stream of customers. Two key concerns joined their effort early and helped anchor it: Harvard Medical School's Massachusetts General Hospital and HouseWorks, a Boston home services company.

The gifted amateur organizers, however, were canny enough to realize they needed help. By donating their own money and raising contributions from others in the neighborhood who believed in the idea, they hired professionals to help market the village concept to residents. They also approached several foundations for money for the subsidized memberships.

The village still relies on foundations and support from board members and the community, but membership is growing by about eight new members a month.

"Membership fees pay for about 50 percent of our expenses, and within a year we think that will rise to 60 percent," Willett says.

The leafy streets of Beacon Hill are lined with 19th-century townhouses where people such as Henry James and Louisa May Alcott once lived. Today's residents live in a dense mix of fine homes, imposing apartment buildings, condos and even subsidized housing for older people, but they still tend to be well heeled and well educated. Can their aging solution really be transplanted to other, very different communities?

Yes, says Coughlin, because innovations "always start at the top, rather than the middle or the bottom. Of all the ideas we've seen here at the Age Lab, this one has got a better chance of going mainstream than many others."

Establishing this city-bred idea in the suburbs and beyond may actually be easier "because the cost of living, the cost of services is much less expensive there than here," says Sue Bridge, 66, one of the founders who, with help from alumni volunteers from Harvard University's School of Business, wrote the village's business plan.

Coughlin points out that "some of the best-knit communities in America are not in the city but in the country, in rural agricultural areas where institutions of faith often organize services and contacts for people."

Transportation in the suburbs or exurban areas could be an issue, but he does not see it as an insurmountable problem. "You have to think creatively," he says. "Missoula, Montana, for example, uses its airport shuttles in the off-peak hours to ferry older residents where they want to go and to take families to visit relatives in nursing homes."

"What we need," Coughlin says, "are folks with the passion to work these things out." Those people may be in a neighborhood association or they may be entrepreneurs "who see an explosion of disposable income and a demand for services that needs to be met."

One of the biggest obstacles to this effort to change the way people age has been the residents themselves. Village research shows that of the 13,000 people in the Beacon Hill area, 14 percent are age 60 or older, and some of these people were the most resistant.

"We couldn't believe all of the people we approached about joining who told us, 'That's a great idea, but I'm not ready yet,'" says board member Ives. "These were people in their 80s and 90s. People just hate to admit they need any kind of help."

Instead, "too many deal with aging by cutting back on where they go and when, what they do, who they see," says Bridge. "Their lives become more and more constricted. When they join the village, suddenly life opens up again."

One resident who initially resisted the village is now a booster. "They treat me like a queen," says Dorothy Weinstein, 97, who recently signed up for a village trip to New Hampshire to see the fall leaves. "They've been a saving grace."

She uses the village grocery service and calls the office when she needs an escort to her clinic appointments. The village even has volunteers who accompany her on neighborhood walks.

A resident of Beacon Hill for 53 years, still living in the house where she and her late husband raised their sons, Weinstein wouldn't think of moving.

"Where would I be as content as I am here?" she asks. "I look out my window at the park. I see people passing. I talk to old neighbors I know. This is the way I want things."

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Beacon Hill Village, e-mail bhvillage@aol.com <<mailto:bhvillage@aol.com>>