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Aging at Home: For a Lucky Few, a Wish Come True

By JANE GROSS

Beacon Hill Village, an innovative nonprofit organization, helps local residents grow old in familiar surroundings

ALONE in his row house on Beacon Hill, with four precipitous flights of stairs and icy cobblestones outside the front door, John Sears, 75, still managed to look after himself after he was hit by a taxicab and left with a broken knee.

That is because Mr. Sears was one phone call away from everything he needed to remain in his home, the goal of more than 80 percent of the nation's elderly as they confront advancing age, according to consistent polls.

Mr. Sears required both practical assistance and peace of mind: Transportation to and from the hospital. An advocate with him at medical appointments. Home-delivered meals from favorite restaurants. Someone at his side as he hobbled to the bank and the barber. Someone else to install grab bars in his bathroom. A way to summon help in an emergency. People to look in on him.

All these services were organized for Mr. Sears by Beacon Hill Village, an innovative nonprofit organization created by and for local residents determined to grow old in familiar surroundings, and to make that possible for others. Community-based models for aging in place designed by the people who use them are the wave of the future, experts say, an alternative to nursing homes and assisted living centers run by large service providers.

At Beacon Hill Village, members must pay dues and must live in either the storied Beacon Hill or Back Bay neighborhoods. Though the model would probably be more difficult to adapt to poorer communities, the organization is poised to show others how to do what it has done. And the offer of expertise comes as the first wave of baby boomers turns 60, many of them dismayed by their parents' long-term care options and anxious about their own.

"Let's hope we're spreading the seed of what could be a prototype," said Mr. Sears, a member of the Massachusetts House of Representatives in the 1960's and of the Boston City Council in the 70's and the loser, in 1982, to Michael S. Dukakis in the state's gubernatorial race. "Maybe once a decade somebody has an idea where you have to say, 'Why didn't someone do this sooner?'"

Beacon Hill Village originated with a dozen civic-minded residents of this neighborhood of 19th-century gas lamps, red brick sidewalks and ancient elms. They all wanted to remain at home, even after transportation and household chores became difficult or dangerous, the point at which many older people quit familiar surroundings. They also wanted to avoid dependence on adult children.

They were unwilling to be herded by developers into cookie-cutter senior housing and told what to do and when to do it by social workers half their age. They had no intention of giving up the Brahms Requiem at St. Paul's Chapel for a singalong at the old folks' home, or high tea at the Ritz-Carlton for lukewarm decaf in the "country kitchens" that are ubiquitous in retirement communities.

"I don't want a so-called expert determining how I should be treated or what should be available to me," said 72-year-old Susan McWhinney-Morse, one of the founders. "The thing I most cherish here is that it's we, the older people, who are creating our own universe."

Five years ago, Beacon Hill Village was a wish, not a plan.

Today, it has 340 members ages 52 to 98, an annual budget of \$300,000, an executive director and staff, a stable of established service providers and enough foundation support to subsidize moderate or low-income members, who number one-fifth of the total. The annual fee is \$550 for an individual and \$780 for a household, plus the additional cost of discounted "à la carte" services.

The grass-roots experiment here drew praise in a recent AARP publication, and has been hailed by an array of research institutes, including the AgeLab at M.I.T. and the North Carolina Center for Creative Retirement in Asheville, N.C. It has also been a hot topic at citizens' roundtables in a dozen communities as people met to discuss how to lead fulfilling lives in the retirement years.

Beacon Hill will publish a how-to manual next month, intended to guide others through the complexity of creating a business plan and surveying community needs. That manual will encourage imitations, according to Judy Goggin, a vice president at Civic Ventures, a research institute focusing on baby boomers and aging, which is helping set up the nationwide roundtables.