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FEATURED

Fairbanks seniors group promotes independence

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ERIN CORNELIUSSEN/FAIRBANKS DAILY NEWS-MINER

Susan Poor, a national specialist on community approaches to aging, speaks during a kick-off event for Aging at Home Fairbanks at the Noel Wien Library on Sunday, November 22, 2015.

FAIRBANKS — A new organization that promises to help older Fairbanks residents live at home independently began accepting members for January 2016 with an event Sunday afternoon at the Noel Wien Library.

Aging At Home Fairbanks is a nonprofit organization affiliated with the North Star Council on Aging's Senior Center. The organization is part social club, part volunteer dispatcher, part Angie's List-style business referral service. Aging at Home Fairbanks is locally managed, but based on a national model known as the village movement. It's the first such village in Alaska.

About 180 people attended a kick-off event at the Noel Wien Library on Sunday afternoon. The event included a presentation from the national village movement leader Susan Poor. Poor is the founder of the San Francisco Village and co-president of the board of the national Village to Village network.

Membership in Aging At Home Fairbanks will cost \$400 per person or \$600 per household in the first year. The membership money will go largely toward hiring a part-time staff director to coordinate and background-check volunteers. The group is now looking for both members and volunteers.

Barbara Lando, the interim director of Aging At Home Fairbanks, gave the audience a few examples from her own life for times when she could have used the help of volunteers.

"My smoke detector is on a very high ceiling and I don't climb ladders," she said. "It's not something I need all the time, but when that battery goes, it starts beeping."

Lando is a former math and computer science professor at the University of Alaska Fairbanks and a former statewide director of the Elderhostel program. She's generally independent, but getting help with small errands like this make it harder to live at home, she said.

She also could have used the help of someone with a truck this summer because she drives a sedan and needed to take her lawn mower into the store for repairs.

The village movement started nationally with a Boston neighborhood called Beacon Hill, whose older residents organized in 2002. Nationally, it's taken off because people want to live at home as they get older, said Poor, the national village movement speaker at Sunday's meeting.

Villages usually form among middle-class seniors who don't qualify for the government programs available to the poorest seniors, but who can't afford long-term care insurance.

“Nobody is going to come rescue you on this. If we want this to happen, if we want to live the life we want, we’re going to have to do this ourselves,” Poor said.

Momentum for a Fairbanks village spread rapidly this year, Lando said. Last December, members of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at the University of Alaska Fairbanks had a meeting about it. Interest spread, and they were offered office space inside the Senior Center off Eagan Avenue. Within the year, they’d received \$4,000 in individual donations to use for startup expenses. The organization will pay 10 percent of its revenue to the North Star Council on Aging for its office space and organizational support.

Many details of the new organization remain to be determined. One key point that hasn’t yet decided is which types of services will be provided by volunteers and which ones will be referred to businesses.

A retired contractor in the audience on Sunday said he wants to help as a volunteer, but wants guidance on what types of jobs he’d do as a volunteer and which ones he should refer.

“I’m sure we’ll be struggling with that,” Lando said. “Certainly if you go in as a volunteer and you say ‘Hey, this is beyond me,’ it’s certainly a possibility that the person needs to get a paid provider.”

The organization’s brochure lists light housekeeping, simple home repair and maintenance, help with technology and outdoor chores as examples of

volunteer-provided services. It lists plumbers, electricians, handymen and health care providers as examples of services Aging At Home Fairbanks would put on its screened vendor list.

Aging At Home Fairbanks doesn’t have precise geographic boundaries. It likely will include members from Fairbanks, Ester and North Pole, but it remains to be seen if there are enough members or volunteers to support people in more remote areas, Lando said.

There also aren’t hard rules on age requirements for Aging At Home Fairbanks. The organization is generally intended for people who are older than 50, but its organizers realize people age at different rates, Lando said.

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