

Aging at home – with a little help from our friends

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Courtesy Aging at Home Fairbanks

Sandy Dauenhauer is ready to help with home maintenance as part of the new Aging at Home Fairbanks program, which will connect seniors with volunteers who perform chores, repairs and other services.

What do you do when you need an extra hand for a household chore and neighbors, friends or kids aren't available to help? In Fairbanks, there's a new organization for older adults that can be the answer. Aging at Home Fairbanks (AAH Fairbanks) has launched this month after a year of preparation, as part of the national Village movement. Susan Poor, co-chair of the board of Village to Village Network, spoke about the national movement at the Fairbanks kickoff event in November.

In 2005, the NY Times published an article about older residents in the Beacon Hill area of Boston who wanted to stay in their own homes as they aged, but they knew they'd need a helping hand periodically. So they started a nonprofit, membership organization, signed up a cadre of volunteers, and figured out a way to connect members with volunteers who were glad to share their expertise and physical abilities. Driving members to medical appointments or shopping was another way volunteers could help.

From Massachusetts, this idea has spread across the country, all the way to Alaska.

AAH Fairbanks expects there will be unique needs for Alaskans – perhaps more emphasis on snow removal, chain saw help when a tree blows across the driveway, need for a truck to haul trash, or dog walking in bad weather.

The aim is not to cover all needs, but when friends, neighbors, or family are not available, AAH volunteers will be there.

A member calls the AAH number, and the director matches the member with a volunteer to help with that request.

"Since AAH just launched this month, we don't know yet all the things our members might request," said organizing member Barbara Lando. "But we expect we'll have a volunteer on our list who will be willing to do it."

Transportation is one of the most requested services in many other organizations. For older adults who don't drive, or don't drive at night, rides to appointments, meetings or concerts are a tremendous help and keep people connected with the community.

In addition to volunteers, members have access to a list of businesses in town which have been recommended by members and friends. This gives members confidence that they are contracting with a

business that has provided good service to others. When picking someone out of the phone book, or online, you don't always know who you are getting.

A social component is another important part of AAH. Member get-togethers will be planned throughout the year. Because loneliness can be a problem for older adults, getting out with friends is important, but that's not as easy for them as it was when they were younger. Members will help plan what they want to do – wine and cheese parties, lunch or dinner out, groups going to a movie or concert, etc.

AAH does not provide medical services, such as home health or personal attendant care. These are provided by other agencies and businesses in town. But AAH may be able to provide meals, shopping or dog walking, for instance, on a short term basis after surgery or when someone is ill.

The North Star Council on Aging (NSCOA) and the Fairbanks Senior Center were big supporters as the group got organized.

"Darlene Supplee, director of the senior center, offered us an office when we were first talking about starting AAH," said Lando. "Others donated a computer and a printer, and we were in business."



Courtesy Aging at Home Fairbanks

Mary Ann Borchert, Karla Zervos and Barbara Lando, a few of the organizers of Aging at Home Fairbanks, attended the national meeting of the Village to Village Network in October to help prepare for launching the Fairbanks organization this month.

NSCOA also agreed to be the fiscal sponsor of AAH, which meant it would be considered a 501 (c) (3) organization, and donations to the fledgling organization would be tax-deductible.

"Right away we received donations of \$4,000 to help us get started," Lando said.

Although there are about 15,000 people over the age of 60 (census projection for 2015) in the Fairbanks North Star Borough, the reach of AAH will be relatively small. The cost of membership (which covers a part time director to coordinate all those calls requesting services) may be prohibitive to some. But AAH hopes there will be donations to a fund so scholarships will be available in the future.

Aging at Home Fairbanks is off to a good start, and organizers are excited about the positive impact it can make for residents in the Fairbanks area. For more information, contact vtvnetwork.org; aahfairbanks.org; aahfairbanks@gmail.com; or 907-799-4026)

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