

Editorial: We all benefit when community supports aging in place

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We all benefit by helping seniors age in place. The idea is not new, though it is gaining momentum in the Valley.

There are at least 217 groups supporting that goal operating throughout the United States, according to the nonprofit organization, Village to Village Network, based in St. Louis.

Among the communities exploring formal networking to help seniors stay in their homes is Northfield, where one-third of the population is over 60, says William McGee, 79. He is one of five Northfield residents exploring the creation of "Neighbors at Home: The Northfield Village," a volunteer-driven group that aims to fill in the gaps exposed by some of the tolls of aging.

"At home" is where the supporters of such efforts wish to stay, enabled by community support in the form of transportation, minor home repairs and chores, and making the link to existing, underutilized services for seniors offered by local organizations such as LifePath in Greenfield.

"The idea is to keep people in their homes and allow them to remain in their community for as long as possible," McGee says.

Four towns in the southeastern part of Franklin County — Leverett, New Salem, Shutesbury and Wendell — have been working to put together "Village Neighbors," a network to help seniors in that area to age in place.

"Given the rural nature of the villages we serve that are not served or are underserved by public transportation, we figure that'll be one of the biggest services," said Thomas Masterton, 69, of Leverett, in a prediction echoed by other elder activists in the region.

In Leyden, an informal system is already underway, according to Amy St. Clair, 73, who said the program would likely be called "Neighbors Helping Neighbors." St. Clair said Leyden's program has "started its baby steps," with 12 volunteers who lend a hand with transportation and chores.

In Hampshire County, elder support networks grew out of a series of discussion groups inspired by the book, "Being Mortal," which confronts issues of aging. As a result, "Plainfield Cares" offers seniors rides to social events, recreation, entertainment, shopping and medical appointments, and also coordinates short-term help during an illness or after hospitalization.

Another program in seven Hampshire County Hilltowns, called "Community Credits," matches people who want to offer volunteer aid with those who want help. Coordinator Lorrie Childs said she hopes that students from Hampshire Regional High School in Westhampton will become part of the group of volunteers.

And in Cummington, a new program called Cummington Community Care aims to strengthen residents' abilities to face emergencies, large and small.

In his "Legislative Viewpoint" published last month, state Sen. Adam G. Hinds, D-Pittsfield, writes, "The low populations and long distances from most everything can be challenging for seniors looking to get proper nutrition, health care and other services in the hill towns."

In his first year as state senator, Hinds says he worked with social service agencies, local officials and other legislators to take on some of these challenges. But, he goes on to say, it's also going to take programs like the ones being created by volunteers to make it easier for seniors to stay in their homes.

Hinds, who represents 18 rural communities in Hampshire and Franklin counties, says, "It's imperative that we care for our neighbors — and it's important that we learn to accept help from others as we move into old age."

The strength of the spin-offs of the Village to Village model is their localized focus: Each group is tailored to the population that it serves. In Northfield, for example, plans are underway for "food for thought" programs in January or February, where residents can offer input on the question, "What do you need for you to stay in your home indefinitely?"

Their responses will drive the offerings of the fledgling program.

Because such groups are volunteer-driven, it's essential to have residents who buy into the concept, on both the giving and the receiving end. That's why the upcoming discussions groups in Northfield are so important.

We applaud such efforts. As McGee says, "The whole thing makes me (feel) warm and fuzzy because it addresses such a need."
