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Helping hands

"VILLAGE" MOVEMENT HELPS SENIORS AGE IN PLACE



IMAGE 1 OF 4

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Mary Bailey volunteer for Community Caregivers picks up client Douglas Bowden at the Albany Physical Therapy at Executive Park Tuesday Nov. 28, 2017 in Albany, NY. (Skip Dickstein/ Times Union)

When Harvey Noordsy and his wife, Betty, retired nearly a decade ago, they moved into a retirement community in Queensbury.

The facility had continuing education classes, manicured lawns, social activities, transportation services and other amenities. But though they stayed for several years, the couple quickly realized they preferred the comfort, convenience and lower cost of aging in a house of their own. Most of the other tenants were also at significantly older than them, Noordsy said.

"We were too young," he said. "We wanted the freedom of being back in our own home."

They moved out, eventually relocating to a house across from the retirement community, and soon after founded Aging in Place-Glens Falls. The nonprofit organization provides transportation to medical appointments, assistance with grocery shopping and other nonmedical services to seniors in Glens Falls, Hudson Falls and Lake George. The group is made up solely of volunteer members, who pay an annual fee of \$20 and operate under a "neighbors helping neighbors" philosophy of assisting each other with activities and tasks as best they can.

"Our goal is to help people stay in their own homes safely and with dignity," Noordsy said. "We try to provide some of the support services they would be getting if they were moving into a retirement home or an assisted-living community."

The organization is a local adaptation of the "village" movement, which aims to help the elderly age in the comfort of their own homes, rather than at a hospital or nursing home. Villages typically function as membership-driven nonprofits run by volunteers and sometimes paid staff who help provide services and programs. Members usually pay annual dues.

The independence afforded through villages appeals to seniors, who remain in their own homes while helping each other with daily tasks, such as getting to appointments. Ninety percent of people age 65 and over would rather stay in their own homes as they age, according to a study by AARP. Cost is another compelling factor: assisted-living facilities in the U.S. cost an average of \$3,750 per month, and a private room at a nursing home costs \$8,121 per month on average, according to a survey conducted by Carescout. The prices are expected to rise to \$5,040 and \$10,914, respectively, by 2027.

Although similar ventures have existed for decades, a group of Boston residents are credited with launching the village model in 2002. Susan McWhinney-Morse and her neighbors in Beacon Hill wanted to age in their homes rather than in facilities, and they formed a nonprofit organization where members volunteer to help each other with shopping, housekeeping, pet care, home maintenance, transportation and other services. Since its founding, the group has grown to include nearly 400 members.

The organization also started the Village-to-Village Network, an online resource that provides a directory of villages and information about starting and operating one. There are more than 300 villages already established or currently in the works in the U.S., including 30 in New York. The Capital Region Villages Collaborative, a group of individuals, agencies and groups interested in developing local villages, formed earlier this year in response to local interest. The Albany Guardian Society is spearheading the project.

"I think we're just on the cusp of this really growing in the Capital Region," said Ken Harris, the society's executive director. "It's a new way of aging in place."

Community Caregivers is part of the collaborative. The nonprofit organization provides help with transportation, home repairs, grocery shopping, paperwork and other needs to people in Albany, Guilderland, Bethlehem, Altamont, Berne and New Scotland, and volunteers also read to and spend time with seniors.

Linda Miller, outreach and education coordinator at Community Caregivers, expects interest in villages to grow. As America's population ages and more baby boomers transition to retirement, seniors and their families are looking for options, she said. More than 15 percent of Albany residents are 65 and older, according to census data.

With family members living farther away from each other than in the past, the elderly have to find other ways to develop social connections, Miller said. In a village system, people get to know each other, another compelling aspect for seniors and their families.

"With this growing cohort, there's a need for solutions other than facilities for people who want to stay in their homes," Miller said. "This approach to aging involves having people help one another. It benefits everyone."

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