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Franklin County residents hope to start elderly support systems

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While attending an August concert at a Keene, N.H., synagogue, Northfield resident Bill McGee noticed a brochure in the entryway that caught his eye.

The brochure provided information about the nationwide Village to Village Network (<http://www.vtvnetwork.org/>). Each “village” is a cooperative network providing services to the elderly, such as transportation and minor home repairs, that allow them to live independently.

“The idea is to keep people in their homes and allow them to remain in their community for as long as possible, to keep them out of nursing homes,” McGee, 79, explained.

McGee thought such a model would be useful in Northfield, particularly given that nearly one-third of the town’s population is over 60, he said. McGee put together an exploratory committee, which he affectionately calls the “Village Five,” made up of himself, Tony Stavely, Jerry Wagener, Judy Wagner and Pam Eldridge.

“Neighbors at Home: The Northfield Village,” as McGee calls the Northfield program, is still in the exploratory stage, with plans for “food for thought” programs in January or February where residents can offer input, focusing on the question, “What do you need for you to stay in your home indefinitely?”

A spreading concept

Northfield isn’t the only town working to start a “village.” There could soon be one encompassing Leverett, Shutesbury, Wendell and New Salem.

According to Thomas Masterton, 69, of Leverett, the idea was born out of a subcommittee of the Shutesbury Council on Aging that wanted to “investigate how to help seniors in the area age in place.”

“We’re rural communities,” added David Dann, 74, of Shutesbury, who is the board of directors president for “Village Neighbors,” as the network is called. “As we age in place, one of the main issues is we all have a desire to stay in our homes, but we might not have the ability to drive or do handyman things around our house.”

So in May 2016, the Shutesbury subcommittee hosted a presentation by representatives from the “Monadnock at Home” village in New Hampshire, and forged ahead to create a local version.



Meanwhile, in Leyden, a more informal system is partially underway. Leyden resident Amy St. Clair, 73, said she and Gerry McCarthy began a program not associated with the formal Village to Village network, but one that offers similar services. Once more organized, St. Clair said the program will 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. As seniors often live far away from their families and feel isolated, St. Clair said, it’s important for community members to “band together and help each other out.”

“All the communities around here are getting older,” she said. “The demographics are changing. I think there needs to be support for people.”

Services

Transportation, whether it be to the grocery store or medical appointments, will be a key part of both “village” networks, as well as Leyden’s program.

“Transportation tends to be one of the biggest services villages offer, and 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,” Masterton said.

In the case of Leyden’s program, St. Clair said the Council on Aging has set aside a fund for volunteers to transport elderly residents. Some volunteers also deliver food and medicine.

“A lot of good people in Leyden are already doing this work,” she said. “We’re just hoping to pull that together into a more structured form.”

All three programs would provide help with indoor and outdoor chores elderly individuals can’t do themselves. This might be something like clearing ice from walkways, Masterton said, or changing a light bulb, McGee said.

McGee's Northfield version would involve contractor services at discounted rates, having volunteers who would deliver garbage to the Transfer Station, and one-on-one electronics training. At the same time, the Northfield Village would act as a concierge service, providing a link to existing services offered by organizations like LifePath.

"We'll be tapping into resources that are often underutilized," McGee said. "The whole thing makes me warm and fuzzy 'cause it addresses such a need."

In considering who to offer services to, McGee divided the elderly into "young-old," "mid-old" and "old-old" categories. The "mid-old" seniors are the Northfield Village's target group, he said: people anywhere from 65 to 85, who usually don't drive at night or in poor weather, but remain largely independent.

By comparison, the "old-olds," McGee said, need daily professional help, and wouldn't receive the necessary care through the village.

Services in Leyden can also be temporary for seniors who fall or suffer an injury that makes them immobile, St. Clair said.

"I went down last year and people all over Leyden helped me," St. Clair remembered. "That's what gave me the idea, to sort of formalize (a program)."

The question of money

"Village Neighbors" garnered a \$15,000 grant from the Executive Office of Elder Affairs and the Department of Housing and Community Development with help from LifePath, Masterton said, to help with startup costs. Meanwhile, the Northfield Village, McGee said, plans to fundraise. Both seek to become 501c3 nonprofits.

After the villages launch, membership fees will cover expenses, organizers agreed. McGee proposed a cooperative of 75 to 100 households contributing approximately \$10 per month, while Masterton estimated the "Village Neighbors" membership would cost under \$150 per year.

"There's a combination of giving and receiving," McGee said, estimating the Northfield Village's operation to cost between \$12,000 and \$15,000 yearly. He suspects scholarships will be offered.

Like Leyden's program, both villages would be operated by volunteers.

Based on the patterns of existing villages, McGee said it usually takes about two years to organize, with the Northfield Village being three months into the process. Meanwhile, "Village Neighbors" is expected to start offering services in mid-2018, Dann said.

McGee suspects the village concept will spread locally, and said anyone he speaks to is enthused about the idea.

"I think it's going to inspire Bernardston, Greenfield," McGee said. "The silver tsunami faces all of them."

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