

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

By Karen A. Meek

A New Virtual Village Called NEST Organizes Support Services for Northeast Seattle Seniors

Shirley Cross arranges a lovely tea service, replete with homemade oatmeal cookies. All of 90 pounds, Mrs. Cross is a spry, sharp-witted grandmother who remains active in her church, has hobbies and many friends. Few could guess that this engaging ball of energy is 93 years old. She relates the story of how she and her late husband, Charles, retired to Seattle after a globe-trotting career in the State Department. The contemporary split-level house they bought more than 30 years ago sits snugly on a low-maintenance landscaped lot. Its interiors showcase mementoes from the Crosses's worldly experiences.

"I don't drive anymore," she admits, "but I can keep up with much of the household work by myself. I'm fortunate to have a close network of friends and family who help out. There are times, though, when I don't have anyone to reach out to for things like yard work or small repairs." Mrs. Cross is not alone when it comes to this quandary. Many seniors—especially those not as active as she is—face a similar challenge.

Independent Seniors Need Resources and Social Connection

In 2008, the Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics published a report showing that by the year 2030, the U.S. population of adults aged 65 and older will nearly double from its 2006 level of 37 million to 71.5 million.¹ As the aging population swells, its mortality rates decrease. The current economic conditions for people of all ages may foretell the continuing strain on public funding for seniors' well-being. With immediate family members scattered across the globe, many

seniors have no accessible family to rely on for help and emotional bonding.

Many neighborhoods have senior or community centers that serve as social gathering venues. But they may lack reliable resources for seniors who need support to maintain a safe, independent lifestyle at home and among familiar community members. To solve this problem, some communities are looking inward to find means of fostering independent living for aging area residents. Neighbors are organizing services-for-seniors communities called virtual villages that pool volunteers, health-focused events, social activities and vetted service firms. Virtual villages are designed to provide resources for seniors who are capable of living in their own homes. To access a virtual village's resources, seniors pay nominal membership dues.

A few years ago, a group of neighbors in northeast Seattle began to investigate how a senior-focused virtual village could work for them.

"While senior centers can be very useful and important to community building, the virtual village model actually provides services to members in their homes," says Jeanne Carpenter of Wedgwood. The viability assessment Carpenter and her neighbors performed in northeast Seattle convinced them to launch a village in their area called North East Seattle Together (NEST).² Carpenter is quick to explain that virtual villages do not compete with senior centers or retirement communities; they complement those services and point to them as resources for members.

The Virtual Village Movement

Senior virtual villages have been forming across the country for about 10 years. Their organizers' objective is to identify indepen-

dent elderly needs in their neighborhoods and to provide services that will allow seniors to remain comfortably in their own homes. Village leaders manage volunteers and vet service companies to provide support for members.

"Seniors are looking for a way to connect with others socially and to get trusted support for tasks that have become difficult to do on their own," Carpenter says. "Members and their families, who often live at some distance, can have peace of mind in knowing that NEST membership includes a network of neighborhood volunteers and vetted vendors who are available to assist members with a one-time requirement, or on an ongoing basis."

Carpenter recently retired from Group Health Cooperative as director of Provider Contracting. She and her Wedgwood neighbor, Debbie Anderson, MSW, a geriatric social worker, had been following the virtual village movement for some time. Carpenter—who serves as NEST's board president—along with Anderson, and several other neighbors, established NEST's 501 (c) 3 status and immediately began organizing speaking opportunities, media outreach, and fund-raising events to launch their virtual village. The immediate goal was to raise \$150,000 to open a formal office, recruit members and volunteers, and develop a list of approved service organizations for members' reference.

How the Virtual Village Concept Works

"There are several different types of villages," says Anderson, a NEST board member. "We are modeling ours after Capitol Hill Village in Washington, D.C., which has a small staff and volunteers who provide a great deal of programming and support."

1 "Older Americans 2008: Key Indicators of Well-Being," *Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics*, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, March 2008.

2 www.nestseattle.org.

continues

Anderson explains that across the country, the majority of villages receive their funding from membership dues. Many villages apply for modest grants from local foundations, which can cover some services or dues for low-income members. "NEST will also apply for grants from local organizations to help pay for scholarships," she says.

Since the virtual village concept is relatively new, little data on funding or operational practices for existing villages is available. Some villages are subsidized with state and municipal funds, while others operate strictly from membership dues.

A recently chartered national village umbrella organization, Virginia-based Village to Village Network, is gathering data

from established villages to share among its growing virtual village member base. This data will fuel village leaders' grant applications for private and public funding sources, as well as help shape public policy around virtual village development.

NEST Membership has its Benefits

NEST members pay \$600 to \$1,200 per year in membership dues, depending on the services they use and whether they are single or a couple. To be eligible, seniors must live within NEST's geographic boundaries. As costs for assisted living and retirement communities soar, the village concept is highly attractive to those who choose to stay in their homes. NEST membership entitles seniors to

meet with the staff personally to review all available services and to communicate their individual needs.

NEST services include:

- Transportation for members with volunteers
- Assistance organizing public transportation
- Walking and exercise groups
- Classes and lectures on topics such as local art, the environment, cooking, floral arranging, gardening, and NEST
- Social and cultural affairs outings, including organized trips to the symphony, theaters, museums, and luncheon and dinner lectures
- Qualified references to health care, social, and service organizations
- References to vetted contractors, service companies, and skilled volunteers

For some members, NEST opens doors to new acquaintances and social activities. "We live in a culturally rich community, filled with interesting people and things to do," Anderson says. "It's important for all of us as we grow older to continue to make new friends of all ages and remain engaged in our community."

Health Benefits of the Village Model

Peter Curtis, MD, a Bryant neighborhood resident and NEST supporter, would agree. Dr. Curtis and his wife, Carolyn, retired and moved to Seattle three years ago. A former professor in the Department of Family Medicine at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Medicine, Dr. Curtis also maintained a primary care clinic, which included house calls.

"Among those who stay in their homes, the risk factors rise for depression from isolation, malnutrition, and lack of exercise and socialization—all can lead to any number of health issues," he says. "We know that there

HAVING IT YOUR WAY By Karen A. Meek

The profile of today's Baby Boomers hardly mirrors prior generations' attitudes about post-retirement lifestyles. In the April 2011 issue of AARP's *Bulletin*, writer Sally Abrahms spells out four living concepts that are becoming increasingly attractive for seniors who want to be connected to community, common interests, and shared resources. In her article "Reinventing Home: Happy Together," Abrahms identifies these "homing" scenarios that are sprouting up across America.

Niche Communities

Members live among others who share the same interests. Seniors are forming collectives of RV parks, artist colonies, and special care communities. The fastest-growing niche groups are university-based retirement communities (UBRCs), often near college campuses, in which the focus is on learning privileges on campus for members.

Cohousing

In these intergenerational communities, families or groups of seniors set up rules for sharing meals and/or living spaces, buy property, and develop close interdependent relationships. They live in fully equipped attached or separate housing units and enjoy activities and meals in a common space. Monthly fees usually cover common grounds-keeping and other expenses.

In addition to the scenarios Abrahms identified, a number of other ideas are being developed that will give seniors more options as they age. Demographers are noting a trend of older populations moving to cities and suburban town centers; being close to shopping centers, mass transit, and other amenities is taking precedence over keeping a big house out in the middle of nowhere. A Minneapolis-based agency called Golden Girls is helping single senior women—whether never married, divorced, childless, or widowed—match up to live together to share expenses and friendships.

The good news is that living options are growing for the increasing number of Boomers moving into their post-working years.

Green Houses

Gerontologist William Thomas, MD, unveiled a fresh face on nursing homes with this alternative approach to institutional geriatric living. Ten or more residents occupy a comfortable house that maintains a staff of cooks, cleaners, and caretakers. Studies show that Green House living has improved residents' quality of life, and often provides better care than standard nursing homes.

The Village Model

As outlined in our story here about NEST Seattle, virtual villages support members who wish to remain in their own homes. Village management provides services such as vetted vendors and volunteers. This model caters best to community members who are healthy and independent, but who seek community among others for activities, support, and relationships.

will be a marked increase of people over the age of 65 in the next 10 years. We may have an elderly crisis on our hands. Social services will be cut back, so the village alternative is one we're strongly supporting."

Carolyn Curtis, a career nurse with a background in sociology and worldwide National Institute of Health trials management, and Dr. Curtis worked with NEST organizers to prepare grant templates for underwriting member scholarships. Mrs. Curtis hosted a gardening lecture luncheon at a local church, and opened a discussion on NEST following the lecture.

"The 40 or so participants, including prospective NEST members and their families, were eagerly interested in this kind of community support mechanism," she says. "Peter and I will remain very active, not only as members, but as volunteers also. It makes good economic sense."

Basia Belza PhD, RN, FAAN, is the Aljoja Endowed Professor in Aging in the Department of Biobehavioral Nursing at the University of Washington. A founding board member of NEST, Dr. Belza says that older adults benefit when living in communities with a solid local support system to help them stay physically active, socially engaged, and safe.

"Falls are a frequent reason for hospital admissions and functional decline," Dr. Belza says. "Physical activity is a powerful and effective intervention. Being physically active can help build muscle strength, improve flexibility and balance, improve cardiovascular health, and reduce falls." One of the programs that NEST offers is transportation to exercise classes or assistance with locating neighbors who are willing to be exercise buddies.

Dr. Belza envisions NEST as a catalyst couched in the community to encourage neighbors to look after one another: "It will create a symbiotic relationship where NEST supports them, and in turn they share resources, ideas, and contributions with their community."

Neighbors Supporting Neighbors

In the virtual village model, it's not only seniors who become invested in supporting one another. NEST's Jeanne Carpenter finds that multi-generational volunteers are signing up with NEST to interact with their aging neighbors. "We're getting volunteers of all ages, including younger community members who want to connect with the elderly for enriching social experiences while helping them out," she says.

Shirley Cross can rest assured that a NEST volunteer or newly acquainted neighbor will help clear away fallen leaves in her driveway. And the volunteer will no doubt be promptly rewarded with homemade cookies and delightful cordiality. ■

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