

It Takes a Village

By Maggie Kraft, MSW

How many times have we heard this phrase? But “it takes a village” is really about remembering a basic fact of life – people need other people to live and to thrive. The Senior Village Movement is spreading like proverbial wild fire because it promises, and delivers, what many seniors are looking for; a way to live independently yet remain connected.

The Village Movement started more than 10 years ago with a group of seniors in Boston who founded “Beacon Hill,” but the Baby Boomers may be the ones to really bring the concept home.

Boomers in their early 50’s are thinking about their future and wondering how they will manage everything that needs to be done while maybe also supporting growing or grown children. Some Boomers are beginning to realize they didn’t adequately plan for their retirement and senior years. They are also worried about their parents, who may not live nearby, but are increasingly in need of services and supports to remain independent.

So what is the Village Movement? It depends who you ask. Not because no one knows, but because Villages are different wherever you go.

Villages are membership driven, grassroots organizations, run primarily by volunteers with some paid staff. They coordinate access to affordable services including transportation, health and wellness programs, home repairs and basic help around the house, social and educational activities and trips. They offer vetted, discounted services through a list of providers, which helps take the guess work out of the process when a member needs a service they have never used before, but doesn’t know who to call.

Villages aren’t regulated and controlled by government rules and regulations. The (other) beauty is that, like any village or town anywhere, a Village develops its own personality because it is formed by the people who “live” in it. While it isn’t actually a physical place or retirement home where everyone lives, it brings people with common needs and interests together.

What works in Boston might not work in Humboldt or Del Norte Counties. In fact, what works in Fortuna might not work in McKinleyville. The model allows flexibility to create smaller villages that can still be part of a larger one, thus pooling resources while retaining what is unique to the local needs.

A Village does NOT duplicate what already exists. It supports rather than competes with already established educational and social opportunities available through local colleges, senior centers, recreation departments and entrepreneurs.

The Village supports senior independence by doing the jobs seniors once did for themselves, but just can't do anymore. Or shouldn't. Like climbing up a ladder or on the roof to clean the rain gutters, or wash the windows, or change light bulbs. Or help lighten the load by doing the heavier yard work or house cleaning. Some things a volunteer can do, some they can't.

Currently there are more than 120 Villages operating across the U.S., in Canada, Australia and the Netherlands and there are over 100 more in development. The Area 1 Agency on Aging joined the Village to Village Network and is working with a consultant and interested volunteers to move the process forward in Humboldt and Del Norte Counties.

The first step is the development of a survey to gauge local interest and what people would like to have in a Village. The survey will be out later this month – mailed to some, available through Survey Monkey for those computer savvy seniors, and distributed to various places seniors frequent.

Everyone who returns a survey will be entered in a drawing for dinner for two at restaurants in various locations. Depending on the results, the next steps will be to formalize an advisory group and start planning focus groups, key informant meetings, and community forums. There is a lot of work to be done, and anyone interested in being involved should sign up for more information at www.a1aa.org.

Meanwhile, watch out for the Survey, coming soon to a village near you.

Maggie Kraft is executive director of Area 1 Agency on Aging