

Free OLLI Seminar is Next Step for Local Village Movement

by Carol Harrison

Gina Belton grew up in the San Joaquin Valley, surrounded by an extended family.

“If a grandparent needed help getting to the bathroom or a store, a nephew or grandchild took them,” the 53-year-old nurse and doctoral candidate said. “My village was my family.”

She moved north to attend Humboldt State, graduated with a nursing degree, married, and raised a daughter who now lives in Oakland.

Belton and her husband have built a smaller village around her five college friends and his brother’s immediate family, but the owner for Redwood Palliative Psychology in Arcata knows that will not be enough in the years ahead.

“Someday, I will be 63, 73 and 83,” she said. “I’d like to remain in my home as long as I can. We will all need some help to do that.”

That’s why she’s excited about the local effort to bring the “Village concept” to the North Coast. Originally started in the Beacon Hill neighborhood of Boston, Massachusetts in 2000, the Village concept is designed to help people remain in their homes by accessing services that address the needs of aging.

Belton was one of 70 people to attend a free, brown bag luncheon seminar last month to discuss the development of a village on the North Coast.

A second update on the “Village” movement is slated for 12 to 1:30 p.m. on Wed., Dec. 3 as part of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute’s free brown bag drop-in program at Humboldt Bay Aquatic Center.

Anyone is welcome.

Area 1 Agency on Aging, with the help of local funders and Osher Lifelong Learning Institute, is working with the Senior Action Coalition to move the village-design effort forward.

“Our next step is to talk to some villages that are already doing it, to share with people what they are doing and to release some of the preliminary data from the Northcoast at Home survey,” said Maggie Kraft, executive director of A1AA.

Maren Rose, the A1AA planner who conducted the survey, said response was “enthusiastic,” with almost 60 percent of nearly 1400 respondents expressing the desire to be involved or learn about a village.

“This will be a volunteer-driven effort,” Kraft said. “We have a template for Village exploration and development thanks to our membership with the Village-to-Village Network. We are eager to see what develops locally.”

According to the Archstone Foundation, villages are consumer and community-driven models that through some combination of membership, staff and volunteering offer four key services:

- Basic core services are covered by the membership fee and include transportation coordination, grocery shopping, community event organization, medical advocacy and information and referral services;
- Concierge services involve the delivery of whatever a member wants and needs to feel safe and comfortable in their homes and connected to the community;
- Community-building services that foster engagement and independence through volunteerism, activism, activities and in-home health care; and
- Health and Wellness services that include classes, support groups, medical house calls and advocacy and relationships with hospitals.

Grants from St. Joseph Care of the Poor and McLean Foundation have helped A1AA provide the formal structure to the design process.

For the next year, A1AA will help the community figure out what a village will look like, what services a rural village will provide, what its organizational structure will look like, how to screen service providers, and how to structure memberships, recruit members and charge for participation.

“The ‘Village asks us to re-imagine what aging can look like,” Belton said. “The idea of rugged individualism? It’s a popular myth that denies we are a community.”

Belton said the family was where she “first learned about community and how to build relationships that are interdependent. Not dependent. Not independent. Interdependent.”

A village, Belton said, is where vetted support will be available to those who haven’t cultivated intergenerational relationships, never had them growing up, or are too far away to access them.

“It has to be viable and self-sustaining,” Kraft said.

She would also like to see an “inclusive village.”

“As an agency, we’d like it to have something for every senior income level and health level; not just the healthy and wealthy,” she said.

Area 1 Agency on Aging paid Carol Harrison to write this article.