

Beacon Hill Village Going Virtual

By Joe Walsh

As the threat of coronavirus drives Bostonians into their homes and away from their normal social activities, some locals are at risk of becoming isolated from their friends and families.

One neighborhood nonprofit is using the internet to keep the area's seniors active through a lonely time.

For the last 21 years, Beacon Hill Village has offered activities for older residents of Boston's downtown neighborhoods. But coronavirus now poses a higher risk to older people, making group gatherings a hazard and "social distancing" a temporary health necessity. Even though this need for isolation is painful for the Village's community, its members are determined to stay connected virtually.

"It's an awful thing that we're going through, but almost all human experiences provide an opportunity for learning," said Steve Roop, a board member. "We're all looking at this frightened and anxious, but want to make sure Beacon Hill Village prevails for its members and itself."

The Village can no longer safely host a busy slate of in-person classes, lectures and discussion groups for the foreseeable future. However, staff have quickly shifted much of

this programming online, allowing members to connect with each other virtually even as they shelter in their homes.

Members have organized lectures, exercise classes, discussions, card games and cocktail parties using the Zoom videoconferencing program over the last few days. While this adjustment is not easy, it ensures that Village members can still participate in a diverse array of programs and stay connected with friends across the downtown neighborhoods, preventing social distancing from turning into social isolation.

"We are trying to overcome the ill effects of isolation on the fabric of the community," said Doug FitzSimmons, the president of the Village's board.

The Village is gradually increasing the size of these programs, experimenting with both formal events and informal talks. Some of its smaller clubs and affinity groups will now meet through videoconferencing, and larger parties and teatime discussions will take place virtually. Meanwhile, volunteers are offering technological help to each other, ensuring that all members of the community can participate.

The organization has cancelled in-person events until the end of April, but public health officials are not sure whether the

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epidemic will still pose a risk by then. Even if the Village is forced into a prolonged period of social distancing, members are eager to continue experimenting with online programs, adding new offerings and changing existing ones to fit the community's needs.

"Our strength is that we're very collaborative," said founding board member Susan McWhinney-Morse.

The organization is still holding a few programs that can only take place in person. Busses are still running to local supermarkets

every week, though members can ask volunteers to take care of their shopping for them, and staff are checking in on the Village's most vulnerable members.

But for the events and group activities that form the core of the Village's programming, members see videoconferencing as a suitable option. These programs stave off loneliness and keep older residents active, a central part of the Village's mission even if it needs to take place through a computer screen.

"This is when we really shine, because we are a member-oriented group of people who care for each other," said board member Sally Brewster. "We're not going to allow anybody to be isolated and alone."