

City Life: The Future of Everything: 10 Long Term Predictions for Boston

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Nursing Homes Will Become Obsolete

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I always had an irrational fear of the concept of “assisted living”—institutions populated only by the elderly and removed from society at large. I lived, and still do, on Beacon Hill. It’s a neighborhood filled with shops, restaurants, and people of all ages taking energy from one another. Many of my friends on the Hill felt exactly the same about nursing homes and their like. We all said, “There’s got to be a better way.” We did not want to grow older feeling marginalized and isolated in an institutional setting.

My friend Nancy Coolidge and I talked about a solution over lunch one day. Then we gathered again with about a dozen people from the area and came up with the idea to keep our older neighbors in their houses and apartments. We would maintain our familiar surroundings, free to live in the real world, not seclusion, and get the care we needed at home. People would become dues-paying members, plus we hoped for contributions from non-members who believed in the possibilities of our success. For a fee, we’d provide vetted healthcare professionals to come to people’s homes. We’d also vet people to help our members with shopping, bill paying, tax assistance, transportation to doctors and dentists—the whole gamut of service providers.

When we went to Harvard Business School with our plan, including becoming a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, I remember them telling us, “You are amateurs. Nothing like this exists in the world. It will never work.” Well, we were used to being patronized, as if we didn’t matter anymore. So it made us more determined

that we were onto something big. Eventually, the *New York Times* did a feature on us, and the concept exploded.

We now have about 370 members in Boston. They pay \$975 annually for a family, and \$675 for an individual membership (fees are reduced for low- and middle-income seniors). Grassroots have spread the program to several hundred neighborhoods in the United States, and places in Europe and Australia have also gotten onboard with similar programs. The city of San Francisco has given us thousands of dollars to assist with village rollouts there. As word of mouth spreads, I believe this program will continue to expand dramatically, potentially extending the lives of so many people who are allowed to feel that they are valued, participating members of the community.

Ultimately, I think the concept is still in its first inning, particularly given the failure of the assisted-living and nursing-home models during the pandemic. Those facilities have contributed to 40 percent of COVID deaths in the U.S. Our members have had no deaths from COVID. Would you like to pay \$975 and stay in your own home with access to help on every level, or pay \$250,000 for institutional care? I'd say it's a no-brainer. —*As told to J.D.S.*