

A Concierge of Your Own

As older people try to keep living at home, having someone to call who'll know who to call helps a lot.

By Nancy Cook and National Journal

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The old rules of aging offered the elderly three choices: move someplace warm, move close to the kids, or move into an assisted-living facility.

These options had something in common: They all involved moving. But many senior citizens don't want to leave the home and community they've known and loved. "The whole bill of goods about being old, that you are a little bit useless and that you've done your thing and checked out your brain at 65, this is a terrible image of aging," says 81-year-old Susan McWhinney-Morse, who recently returned home from a tour of archeological digs in Iran. "We just felt that everything was wrong about how older people were treated."

So in 1999, McWhinney-Morse and a group of Bostonians sought to change this image of aging. The group wanted to devise a strategy to allow them to remain in their homes while not burdening adult children or friends. Financially, they did not want to develop a program so expensive that it would exclude lower-income or middle-class people from joining. They spent a few years researching ideas, putting together a business plan, and raising seed money.

In 2002, they opened the Beacon Hill Village, a nonprofit network of senior citizens. For an annual fee ranging from \$110 to \$975, depending on income and household size, members have access to free exercise classes and social clubs, a community of like-minded seniors, and a small but dedicated professional staff that can arrange for services a member might need, such as a ride to the supermarket, nursing help, and recommendations for handymen, plumbers, and computer geeks. It's like having access to a concierge who understands the needs of the elderly. Members pay the vendor directly for the services they use.

"They created this concept out of nothing," says Laura Connors, executive director of Beacon Hill Village. "They were trying to demonstrate what aging can be."

Beacon Hill Village has grown to roughly 340 members, covering the affluent Beacon Hill and Back Bay neighborhoods along with the grittier North End. Inspired by the success in Boston, another 165 villages have opened across the country, serving roughly 30,000 members. The idea surged across the country after *The New York Times* profiled the Boston experiment in 2006. Its founders were so inundated for advice on how they got started that they wrote a manual, now posted on their website, for anyone interested in trying the same.

These "villages" have popped up in big cities, small towns, and rural locales, each one tailored to the needs of its place and founders. Rural villages, for example, would involve more transportation options and driving for residents, since services are so spread out—unlike Beacon Hill, say, where even an older person might stroll to a nearby restaurant to see friends. Each venture "will leverage what the community has to offer," Connors says.

A problem that many such villages share is that not everyone who has reached 65 wants to associate with a program for the elderly. "The 'younger' older adults " don't think they need it," Connors says. "That's one of our challenges: How do we talk about ourselves differently?"

Consider the potential benefits for the aged. Joan Bragen, a sharp 80-year-old, joined Beacon Hill Village four years ago when she realized that she needed occasional help around her condominium and in getting around Boston. Living alone without a car and with her closest relatives in New York, she has leaned on Beacon Hill Village to hire a visiting nurse after surgery, to find an electrician, and to arrange weekly rides with volunteer drivers to buy groceries. Bragen has also gone with other members to museums and out to Tanglewood, in western Massachusetts, where the Boston Symphony Orchestra performs in the summertime.

"It is like having family in the neighborhood. The people from the village always respond immediately," she says. "They are like a touchstone."

They may also be a money-saver. According to Connors, the Beacon Hill director, the "village" model provides seniors with a cheaper alternative to assisted living facilities,

which can cost thousands of dollars per month. Besides arranging for needed services, the organization's staff often negotiates discounts for its members.

The organization has minimal overhead costs. Beacon Hill Village owns no property—it rents office space in a one-time police precinct headquarters—and employs only four people, including two part-timers. Just over half of its budget comes from members' annual fees; the rest comes from foundations, corporations, and individual donors. Some of its kindred organizations rely more on volunteers to provide services to members.

This concierge-like model won't work for all seniors, especially those who suffer from poor health or dementia or other cognitive problems. It works best for people who are self-sufficient enough to live at home without round-the-clock care. Just 15 percent of the Beacon Hill Village members are considered frail, some of them requiring an aide's home care a few hours a day.

"The village is not necessarily going to take care of you to the grave," says McWhinney-Morse, the 81-year-old member, "but it can help you find places to go when you need more help."

It also can provide a social outlet, often harder to find as people age. Besides the weekly runs to the grocery store and the cultural excursions, members plan activities among themselves. One group of men tries a happy hour at a different bar each month; another group argues politics over coffee one morning a week. Some members play bridge or gather weekly for an afternoon movie—"a community within a community," Connors says.

When a member's life changes—because of ill health or a spouse's death—other members can help in a non-intrusive way. The same goes for the organization's employees, who check up on feeble members without dictating the type of care or services that anyone needs.

"What I think is remarkable is that it really is older people creating something for themselves and not looking to the government to give us money or for someone to build something for us," McWhinney-Morse says. "It is simply allowing people to create how and where they want to age."