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Villages offer neighborly option to age in place: Provide help, social connections

By Alicia M. Colombo



Janet Burnham loves the Washington Square neighborhood where she has lived happily for more than 30 years and she plans on staying. At 71, Burnham is active and healthy, but knows she can't forestall the effects of aging forever. She can, however, plan for a day when she may need some help with everyday activities, such as shopping or getting to medical appointments.

Burnham was a member of the founding board for Penn's Village, which got its start in 2008 and is now the largest of Philadelphia's three villages with 270 current members. "The original vision was to create a community that connects people, so they can support and help each other," she said.

The village concept is to create a framework that enables people to remain active and engaged in their community for as long as possible. All villages have a common structure, according to the Village to Village Network, a national resource for connecting, establishing, and improving villages. They are membership-driven, grass-roots organizations that through volunteers and sometimes paid staff, coordinate access to affordable services. The range of services varies by village, but often includes transportation, health and wellness programs, home repairs, social and educational activities, and other day-to-day needs that enable individuals to remain connected to their community throughout the aging process. Members pay an annual fee to join and receive a variety of benefits.

The village movement is growing: there are currently 170 active villages worldwide and another 160 in development. Beyond the basic framework, the similarities of individual villages end. “If you’ve seen one village, you’ve only seen one village. Each one is different,” said Mary Flournoy, co-chair of East Falls Village, which has about 165 members. She added that villages are not restricted to cities. They are found in many suburban and rural areas as well.

Community connection

One key benefit is maintaining a meaningful connection to your community. “Isolation is a big issue for older adults. This is a way of making and keeping connections,” said Jane Elery, executive director of Penn’s Village. “Members maintain stimulation by going out regularly and meeting others. For volunteers, the problem-solving and engagement in creative work and meaningful tasks helps keep their minds active after retirement.”

Participation gives retirees and active adults, like Burnham, an opportunity to use their time and talents. “But it’s also an insurance policy. If I ever need help to stay in my own home, I know that help’s going to be there,” said Burnham.

Social and informational events are a mainstay of village offerings, since remaining active is essential to healthy aging. Members can partake in regular trips to museums, restaurant outings, and workshops or educational programs. There are weekly gatherings for coffee, and seminars about topics of interest to seniors, from how to continue gardening with arthritis to making end-of-life decisions. Penn’s Village also has a caregiver support group that’s facilitated by a retired social worker over the phone. Most events are included with membership; sometimes a nominal fee is charged to cover expenses of a speaker, instructor or meeting space. Since villages operate as community organizations and partner with neighborhood agencies, they are able to keep costs low.

Services in your home

Older adults don’t want to burden their children or family, and are often reluctant to ask for help. “Government is imperfect, to say the least. We are taking it upon ourselves to prepare for our future,” said Peter Javsicas, president of Northwest Village Network, which is the newest of Philadelphia’s villages with 67 members and growing. “Lots of us have trouble asking for help, but it’s easier to approach someone you know. In many cases, you will know the volunteer who is coming to drive you,” he said.

There’s a range of ages and activity levels in villages. While villages attract many older adults, they also have an intergenerational makeup. Penn’s Village, for example, serves some younger adults with chronic conditions. “When we started out, membership was restricted to people age 50-plus. But we were approached by some younger residents who wanted to join. Even after we dropped the age requirement, our membership has remained predominantly older folks,” said Flournoy.

The most requested service for all of the villages is transportation, and the need can arise unexpectedly. “When I had shoulder surgery, I only had one operable arm. My wife injured her wrist at the same time, so neither of us was able to drive for two weeks. I only had to pick up the phone once. People even brought food, although we didn’t ask for it,” said Phil Hinele, the other co-chair of East Falls Village.

Technology assistance is a growing need among seniors. Whether you need help setting up a new printer, have a question about Facebook, or can’t figure out your TV remote, a tech volunteer will come to your rescue. “A member pointed out that the cost of one call to professional tech support pays for the village membership,” said Hinele.

Other services can include friendly visiting, minor home repairs or assistance, such as changing light bulbs; and assistance with grocery shopping and errands. Like some other villages, Penn’s Village is piloting a new program, which includes accompanying members to medical appointments.

Services are provided by volunteers, who are thoroughly vetted by an interview process that includes background and reference checks. For drivers, valid insurance and vehicle registration and a clean driving record are also required.

For services beyond the scope of what volunteers can provide, such as home remodeling or appliance installation, village members have access to a list of recommended service providers in the area.

Northwest Village Network has a partnership with local retailers and professional services that provide a discount to members. “We try to be a hub of existing resources, so we don’t have to duplicate efforts. We have an ongoing relationship with community organizations and try to encourage our members to take advantage of existing programs...,” said Javicas.

Benefits of village membership are both tangible and intangible. Many village members report an increase in their circle of friends. “It’s a social network. I know at least 20 people who I didn’t before. People talk about having a sense of community and what follows from that is a sense of security,” said Hinele. “On the flip side, there’s an opportunity to be helpful. One of the best contributors to well-being is opportunities to be helpful to others. The village solidified a community waiting to happen.”

Villages share a purpose; each is unique

Each village is independently run and, therefore, sets its own membership requirements, fees, and services. However, all require participants to be age 18 or older and to live in the specified geographic area, which makes it convenient for volunteers to provide services and allows members to feel close.