

Village Movement Grows

Article submitted by Arnie Snyder, owner of Elder Life Advisors, Littleton, Colorado.
www.elderlifeadvisors.com

Just a decade ago, Boston's Beacon Hill Village established an innovative model to empower older Americans to age in their own homes, supported by an intentional community. Now, the national village movement has soared to a coast-to-coast membership of 11,000 in 55 different villages.

With a 66% annual growth (ten-year average), the village movement is gathering an impressive head of steam. Let's hope for the equivalent of a volcanic eruption to make this powerful idea accessible to the greater part of the 72 million Americans who, within twenty short years, will be 65 years or older.

Although the challenge appears daunting, I'm betting on the elegant simplicity of villages to win the hearts of Americans by the millions. Nearly ninety percent of Americans want to age in the convenience and privacy of their own homes.

For about \$10 to \$100 per month, a village gives members access to volunteer services; social and educational activities; health and wellness programs, and; trustworthy vendors for outside services. In short, most of the major obstacles to keeping older Americans in their own homes can be overcome through an inter-generational community of neighbors helping neighbors – with transportation, home maintenance, safety, security, social connection, and more.

To gain a sense of the enormous potential of villages, consider this social phenomenon on three different levels: a bird's eye view of day-to-day village life; how successful villages spawn new villages, and; the macro view of public policy.

Bird's Eye View – A Day in the Life of a Village Member

Villages are large enough to organize and deliver services, yet small enough for members to form meaningful connections and lasting friendships. The benefits of small town community are available to urban, suburban, and town dweller alike. According to Susan Poor, senior policy advisor for Village to Village Network, village memberships average 100 to 150, with the largest approaching 450 (KQED radio interview, 4-26-2011).

Within a village on any given day, interaction takes place with popcorn-like contagion. An AARP magazine article (“The Real Social Network,” May/June 2011) colorfully depicted social routines at Lincoln Park Village, in Chicago: “David, 68, a university vice president, leads bird-watching tours attended by neighbor Rick, 68. . . Rick, a retired IT consultant, clears snow from David's sidewalk. . . Rick also helps Kay, 87, a historian, with the visuals for her art lecture.” In contemplating several examples like these, you can't help but get the picture. A village empowers people to turn their innate desire for community into a reality.

Shoulder-to-Shoulder – Village Growth by Sharing Best Practices

Looking at a map of villages, you can observe the growth of this movement in a sort of freeze-frame view. Village locations cascade down from their New England origins, southward through the Middle Atlantic states, and westward to the Mississippi River. On the West Coast, clusters of villages dot the area from San Francisco to San Diego. With a few notable exceptions, the rest of the country waits in anticipation.

This pattern is instructive. Established villages – even newbies – eagerly share their wisdom and experience with cohorts in adjacent towns and cities. Leaders can easily visit each other in person. More than a few villages have probably grown out of personal connections.

On a national basis, the Village to Village Network was created early last year to share information and resources among villages. As a partnership between Beacon Hill Village and NCB Capital Impact, VtV Network has been designed to share the collective experience of members. The \$350 annual membership cost (per village) is a bargain. It includes written materials, interactive online events, and collaborative sharing. VtV Network's software manages village activities, at an affordable extra cost. VtV Network also holds an annual national conference; the next will be in Oakland, California, October 24-26, 2011.

Thirty-Thousand-Foot View – Public Policy

As the village movement proves itself to be one of the practical solutions to our national aging crisis, we can expect to see a major shift in public policy. State and federal government cannot afford to pay mounting long term care costs for a large elderly population. A village not only keeps older people at home, it makes them less likely to have accidents or to suffer ill health. Health and wellness programs and the salutary effect of community will certainly attract the interest of public officials, who will come to see villages as something that should be affirmed by public policy. How this will play out we cannot know, but it will surely help the village movement to snowball.

“When you think about the fact that by 2032, there will be more people over 65 than people under 15, we have no time to lose in getting sustainable villages in place,” notes Candace Baldwin, co-director of the Village to Village Network.

Villages will be an eminently workable solution for millions of Americans who want to live at home and in community as they grow older. To learn more, check out Village to Village Network (www.vtvnetwork.com), or an open village in your area.

About the Author:

Arnie Snyder is owner of Elder Life Advisors, and co-founder of Washington Park Cares, a Denver village which opened in 2008. He serves on the Advisory Council for Village to Village Network and was a panel speaker at the 2010 National Village Gathering in Philadelphia. www.elderlifeadvisors.com

© 2011, All Rights Reserved by O. Arnold Snyder

Posted on www.CaregiverClassDirectory.com, July-August 2011

File Name: ARTICLE_village_movement_grows.doc