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ELDERS SPARK A SOCIAL REVOLUTION

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Suzanne Stark is an 82-year-old author and freelance writer with an enviable social and professional life. At work on her latest assignment, she fills her days with research, committee meetings and stimulating social activities. Stark has heart problems and a fractured foot, which make it challenging to do daily chores, but she knows she has ready access to help. She simply makes a call to Beacon Hill Village (BHV), the membership organization that she and her neighbors created so they could enjoy the support of a retirement community without having to move.

From the beginning, Stark embraced the concept, attending several planning meetings before BHV was launched in 2002; she continues to serve on its standing committees. Her involvement protects her from two problems that often lead to premature loss of independence: social isolation and lack of needed services. “Because I’m in my 80s, so many of my friends have died or moved away,” she explains. “The Village has given me a whole new set of friends.”

Beacon Hill Village has sparked a social revolution, inspiring dozens of groups to launch similar ventures nationwide. Known as “intentional communities,” these consumer-led groups share a common vision of a community where members can age in place. Like Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORCs), intentional communities embrace the strategy of bringing services to people rather than moving people to services. Intentional communities differ from NORCs, which mostly originate from the aging network, in that they are created by consumers taking direct charge of their future.

THE ORIGINAL MODEL

Beacon Hill Village is a thriving organization with 460 members, ages 50 and over, who live throughout central Boston. Its Board of Directors, comprised of 11 founding members, oversees the organization and retains control over the Village’s policies, programming and planning. There are annual membership fees of varied amounts for individuals and families, with some membership subsidies available that are covered by continual fundraising efforts.

The cornerstones of BHV’s appeal are one-stop shopping and community. Services and programs include social and cultural events; transportation and concierge services; home maintenance, repair and adaptation; and comprehensive homecare offered by HouseWorks, the Village’s preferred homecare provider and initial strategic partner. Some services, like weekly grocery transportation and social activities, are covered by membership fees. Others are available on a fee-for-service basis, often at a pre-negotiated discount.

In the daytime hours, the Village staff arranges for any services that members might request. They use a pool of thoroughly vetted providers along with volunteer resources. After hours, members can call HouseWorks for any homecare needs and receive immediate response. The availability of 24-hour homecare makes it possible for members to live at home for as long as possible, which is BHV’s fundamental purpose.

Currently, only 5% of BHV members receive homecare from HouseWorks, though homecare is readily available whenever it is needed. One founding member who now relies on private-pay homecare says, “Having access to quality care is something you dream about when making plans. Then all of a sudden, plans become reality. It’s been a delight that the goals we set have been more than realized by

organizations like HouseWorks.”

This man’s experience as a BHV founder and care beneficiary offers important clues about the elder-care marketplace. People who found intentional communities are determined to take control of their future: they are not in denial about aging, and want a choice of eldercare living options. This proactive population does not believe that Medicare will meet its needs and does not expect experts to solve its problems. Accustomed to paying for convenience, those who are involved in building intentional communities are willing to pay for the services they’ll need to age in place.

A GRASSROOTS MOVEMENT

Six years ago, the Village was the only enterprise of its kind. Today, many similar projects nationwide are in various stages of development, which range from exploratory living-room discussions among like-minded neighbors to fully operational nonprofit organizations. New communities, from California to Illinois to Washington, D.C., are taking the original village model and creating variations that reflect local characteristics and priorities.

Since these grassroots communities reflect the characteristics of their membership, no two are exactly alike. Most intentional communities, however, share the following characteristics: consumer buy-in and control; emphasis on community building; enhanced access to services; coordination of local resources; and a one-stop shopping approach. Across these new models, however, there is increasing emphasis on forming a strong volunteer component—a neighbor-to-neighbor approach to service delivery that controls costs while fostering a sense of community. Another emerging trend is the escalating use of Internet resources and technology, which improves access to quality services, minimizes staffing needs and strengthens community and cooperative assistance among membership.

Capitol Hill Village (CHV) in Washington, D.C., embraces both trends. It is a “volunteer first” organization that uses its own volunteer corps to fulfill membership service requests whenever possible. Alternatively, CHV uses its preferred providers, a meticulously vetted list generated in collaboration with the Washington Consumers’ Checkbook, a nonprofit, Internet-based service that rates all local vendors serving the Capitol Hill neighborhood.

PROVIDER OPPORTUNITIES

Aging consumers who favor the intentional community model expect exceptional provider responsiveness and reliability. They are aware of their collective buying power and intend to control how and when services are delivered. All types of aging services providers—from local and regional agencies to start-up entrepreneurs—who adapt to meet these service expectations will flourish if they thoroughly research this movement and proactively initiate conversations with local communities. Because of its successful relationships with Beacon Hill Village, Cambridge at Home and several developing communities in the Washington, D.C., area, HouseWorks has become a primary information source for providers that wish to serve the intentional community marketplace.

PUBLIC POLICY TRENDS

Given the public interest in prolonging elder independence, intentional communities are in an excellent position to advocate for policies that support their financial viability, particularly in low- and moderate-income communities. “Intentional communities are a unique model that has policy implications in healthcare, long-term care and housing,” says Elaine Dalpiaz, policy and legislative consultant with Denno Strategies in Washington, D.C. Additionally, the rise of intentional communities has influenced a policy shift toward consumer-driven services within the Administration on Aging and the Center for Medicare Services. These trends can help pave the way for increased intentional community development, especially if they are combined with funding that helps low- and moderate-income communities cover the costs of community staffing and services. ❖

Andrea Cohen is the cofounder and chief executive officer of HouseWorks, a private-pay homecare company serving the greater Boston and Washington areas. Judy Willett is the executive director of Beacon Hill Village in Boston, Mass. Susan Fienberg of HouseWorks also contributed to this article. The following websites offer more information about intentional communities listed in the article: www.houseworks.com/innovations/communities; www.beaconhillvillage.org; www.cambridgeathome.org; www.capi.tolhillvillage.org