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Senior Real Estate Matters

Intentional Communities Help Neighbors Help Neighbors

By Elyse Umlauf-Garneau

We've all read the statistics that the vast majority of baby boomers and seniors would like to age in place. But a lack of services for both small and large troubles—snow shoveling, transportation and home health care—often make it impossible for seniors to remain at home safely. That's one reason intentional communities are popping up across the country.

The concept is a departure from the tradition of bringing seniors to the services. The intentional community model brings necessary services to seniors' doorsteps. "These communities are really the wave of the future for aging," comments Dianne Campbell, executive director of Lincoln Park Village, a Chicago community launching in May.

People in a neighborhood or city come together to organize, fund and manage not-for-profits that serve as connectors between seniors and the services they require to age in place. The organizations often are buttressed by an army of volunteers, and the side benefits include social and emotional connections for both for the seniors and the volunteers.

Though there are more than 100 such communities either operating or starting up around the country, no community is exactly the same. That's the beauty of them, say supporters. Each has its own culture and services, depending on residents' needs, interests and desires.

If there's not one in your area, you could be the catalyst and create your own group. Here are some starting points:

- ❖ Research other similar communities that have been established and learn from their successes and mistakes. Boston's Beacon Hill Village was the earliest intentional community, and its

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workbook (see "Resources") guides newbies through the process.

- ❖ Develop a founding group. Ideally, you want those committed to donating skills, time, knowledge and funds. Staying Put In New Canaan, a New Canaan, Connecticut community, for instance, tapped local marketing, finance, accounting, legal and administrative talent who offered services pro bono. Many continue to do so. And Lincoln Park Village started with just three couples chatting and seeking alternatives to existing senior care options.
- ❖ Assess interest and recruit prospective members. You'll likely find enormous interest because so many have the desire to stay put. That, in fact, was the starting point for New Canaan's Staying Put, which celebrated its first anniversary in January. "People came together who didn't want to leave town as they aged," comments Jane Nyce, the group's executive director.
- ❖ Fund the plan. Particularly in this economy, locating funding sources is a challenge. Seed money can come from local businesses and corporations and board members.
- ❖ Create a business plan, including staffing needs, operating cost estimates and funding resources.
- ❖ Develop relationships with neighborhood groups. Include healthcare ventures, businesses and government groups geared to seniors, along with art and education programs to figure out what's already available and where holes exist. "Not duplicating what already exists is important," comments Campbell. And networking with local groups has offered expertise, advice, insight and access to data and studies that have been invaluable to Lincoln Park Village.

- ❖ Determine membership costs. Annual membership fees for Staying put are \$360 for individuals and \$480 for multiples, such as couples. Right now 45 percent of Staying Put's operating costs stem from membership, though the long-term goal is to have an endowment in place. Lincoln Park Village anticipates annual membership fees of \$540 for individuals and \$780 for households.
- ❖ Estimate costs of services. Some services are included in the membership fee and some are provided free by volunteers. Others are offered on a fee-for-service approach, and groups typically negotiate for discounted rates with providers. "We have more than 50 volunteers in place to get us off the ground," says Campbell. "Having that volunteer framework in place is key." Not only does it keep costs down for members, it also leads to new friendships among neighbors and strengthens community bonds.
- ❖ Promote the idea. Nyce recalls that Staying Put had three town meetings to introduce the concept, get people interested and recruit volunteers and members. Nyce notes that having a passionate, respected spokesperson can be advantageous. In Staying Put's case, a local doctor who had been practicing in town for more than 50 years and was fluent in senior and aging topics served as the voice and as something of the backbone for the group.
- ❖ Locate service providers, ranging from home health care providers and computer technicians to handymen, landscapers and plumbers. What services you offer depend on members' needs. Recognize that the needs in urban areas may differ from those in rural and suburban communities. "Transportation is one of our greatest challenges," says Nyce. "We have volunteers who provide personalized transportation, helping member run errands, taking them to doctors' appointments and car pooling for special events," says Nyce.
- ❖ Develop enrichment programs. Though one aim of intentional communities is to allow people to age in place, the other goal reaches beyond just servicing the members' physical needs. A critical component is the social aspect. That includes providing a broad array of outings and events, including museums and concerts, dinners, classes, lectures, exercise

groups, and so forth. "Community-building is so important. We want to weave a network of community support and give multiple generations an opportunity to interact, make new friends and build programs," Campbell comments.

Such groups can also help members fend off loneliness. "As seniors age, they tend to get more isolated. We try to do very personal things—home visits and calls—to minimize that isolation and keep up with what's happening with our seniors," says Nyce. "It's all about respecting and caring for seniors and neighbors caring for one another," she adds.

Resources:

- ❖ Beacon Hill Village (www.beaconhillvillage.org) sells a workbook, "Beacon Hill Village Founder's Manual," and offers workshops and consulting services to start-up groups.
- ❖ HouseWorks, Boston (www.houseworks.com)—Andrea Cohen, the company's co-founder and CEO, has helped multiple intentional villages get started. The site offers information launching villages.
- ❖ Lincoln Park Village (www.lincolnparkvillage.org)
- ❖ Staying Put in New Canaan (www.stayingputnc.org)

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