

Intentional Communities for Aging in Place: Consumers Taking the Lead

by Andrea Cohen and Judy Willett

At 82, author and free-lance writer Suzanne Stark continues to enjoy an enviable social and professional life. At work on her latest assignment, she fills her days with research, committee meetings, and stimulating social activities that she and her neighbors plan together to suit their interests. Heart problems and a fractured foot make daily chores quite challenging, but she's confident she can get whatever help she needs by making a single phone call to Beacon Hill Village, the membership organization that she and her neighbors created so they could enjoy the support of a retirement community without having to move.

Stark embraced the concept from the beginning, attending several planning meetings before the Village was launched in 2002, and she continues to serve on its standing committees. Her involvement has protected her from two problems that so often lead to premature loss of independence: social isolation and lack of needed services. "Because I'm in my 80's, 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 from coast to coast. Known as "intentional communities," these consumer-led groups share a common vision of creating 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. What distinguishes intentional communities from NORCs are their origins. Most NORC projects have been launched by the aging network; in contrast, intentional communities are created by consumers who have decided to take charge of their future.

The Original Model

Beacon Hill Village is now a thriving organization with 460 members age 50 and over who live throughout central Boston. Comprised of 11 founding members, its Board of Directors continues to oversee all aspects of the organization and retains control over the Village's policies, programming, and direction. Annual

membership fees are \$600 for individuals and \$850 for families, and membership subsidy is also available thanks to constant fundraising efforts.

One-stop shopping and community are the keystones of the Village's appeal. Services and programs include anything and everything members may request including social and cultural events; transportation; concierge services, home maintenance, repair and adaptation; and comprehensive home care provided by HouseWorks, the Village's preferred home care provider and a strategic partner from the start. Some services, like weekly grocery transportation and social activities, are covered by the annual membership fee. Others are provided on a fee-for-services basis, often at a discount the Village has negotiated for its members.

During normal working hours, Village staff make arrangements for any service a member may request, drawing on a list of thoroughly vetted providers supplemented by volunteer resources. After working hours, members may call HouseWorks for any home-care-related need and receive an immediate response. This 24-hour home care availability is critical to the Village's fundamental purpose: to make it possible for members to continue living at home as long as possible.

A Grass-Roots Movement

Six years ago, the Village was the only enterprise of its kind. Today, there are dozens of similar projects across the country at various stages of development, ranging from exploratory discussions held in the living rooms of like-minded neighbors to fully operational non-profit organizations. New communities in Palo Alto, CA; Minneapolis, MN; Chicago, IL; Lancaster, PA; Washington DC and other cities from coast to coast are taking the original village model and creating variations that reflect local characteristics and priorities.

Among these new communities, there is an increasing emphasis on building a strong volunteer component – a neighbor-to-neighbor approach to service delivery that controls costs while building community among members. Another emerging trend is the increasing use of internet resources and technology to improve access to quality services, minimize staffing needs, build community, and facilitate mutual assistance among members.

Capitol Hill Village (CHV) in Washington D.C. embraces both trends. Calling itself a “volunteer first” organization, CHV fills service requests with its own

corps of volunteer whenever possible. When a volunteer cannot meet a member's need, CHV turns to its preferred providers, a meticulously vetted list generated in collaboration with the Washington Consumers' Checkbook, a nonprofit internet-based service that rates all local services and has added a special screen identifying top-rated providers that serve the Capitol Hill neighborhood.

Common Ingredients

Since each of these grass-roots communities reflects the characteristics of its membership, no two are exactly alike. Even so, most intentional communities share the following characteristics: consumer buy-in and control; emphasis on building community; enhanced access to services members; coordination of all local resources; and a one-stop shopping approach. At this early stage of development, notably few community members need home care services; for example, only 5% of BHV's member are currently receiving home care from HouseWorks, the Village's preferred provider. However, community members value knowing that reliable and responsive assistance will be available whenever they need it – especially home care. One founding member who now relies on private-pay home care puts it this way: “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 gentleman's experience as a community founder and beneficiary provides important clues about the changing senior market. First and foremost, founders share a determination to take control of their future. They're neither in denial about aging nor are they willing to passively accept current senior living options. They do not harbor the illusion that Medicare will meet their needs and they do not expect experts to solve their problems. Accustomed to paying for convenience, they're more willing than their predecessors to pay for the services they'll need to age in place.

Provider Opportunities

These new consumers expect exceptional responsiveness and reliability from providers. They have a strong sense of their collective buying power and expect to control how and when services are delivered. Given these trends, providers who adapt to meet the service expectations of intentional communities will be well-positioned to flourish in the years to come. Recognizing the opportunity, all types of

providers – ranging from Area Agencies on Aging to start-up entrepreneurs – are eager to learn about the movement and initiating conversations with local communities. Due to its successful relationships with Beacon Hill Village, Cambridge at Home, and several developing communities in the Washington area, HouseWorks has become a primary source of information for providers exploring business opportunities associated with the intentional community movement.

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 health care, long-term care and housing,” says Elaine Dalpiaz, policy and legislative consultant with Denno Strategies in Washington, DC. Moreover, intentional communities reflect the policy shift toward consumer-driven services within the Administration on Aging and the Center for Medicare services. These policy trends can help pave the way for 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.

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More information about intentional communities can be found at the following websites:

HouseWorks	www.house-works.com/innovations/communities
Beacon Hill Village	www.beaconhillvillage.org
Cambridge at Home	www.cambridgeathome.org
Capitol Hill Village	www.capitolhillvillage.org