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# Home Care in the “Village”

by Andrea Cohen and Susan Tresch Fienberg

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Following the lead of Boston’s Beacon Hill Village, the nation’s first aging-in-place community, scores of consumer groups across the country are banding together to take control of where and how they’ll live in the years ahead. Rather than moving to senior housing for the services and social support it provides, these visionaries expect to continue living in their own homes as they grow old, supported by the membership organization they themselves have created. Founders of the new “villages” — also called intentional communities — know they’ll need more than home care to realize their vision, so they’re also organizing member-selected activities and a rich menu of concierge services. At the same time, they realize that exceptionally reliable home care is essential for members to continue living safely at home when facility-based care would otherwise be needed.

## What are the Options?

When community founders consider how they will provide home care for their members, they are faced with four basic options:

1. Providing members with a list of vetted providers.
2. Developing a preferred provider relationship with one or more companies.
3. Establishing or acquiring their own home care company.
4. Supplementing paid services with a neighbor-to-neighbor program that facilitates mutual assistance among members on a volunteer basis.

Most new villages do not have the resources,

expertise, or inclination to acquire a home care company or form their own home care divisions, though large villages with significant home care utilization are sure to re-visit this option as they mature. At present, most are choosing to pursue some variation of a preferred-provider relationship, either by providing members with a vetted list of home care companies or contracting with one or more providers to serve the membership.

Because most village founders have little personal or professional experience with the home care industry, they often don’t know where to begin when it comes to selecting a home care provider. Therefore, having heard of HouseWorks’ success as Beacon Hill Village’s home care provider, founders are increasingly contacting us for guidance as they begin considering how they will meet their members’ home care needs.

## What Villages Expect

Based on five years of feedback from Beacon Hill Village members and staff, HouseWorks has learned what most villages are likely to expect from their home care providers. Above all, they will expect a level of customer service that exceeds today’s industry norms. In every aspect of service delivery—availability, flexibility, responsiveness, back-up, and hiring standards—policies and practices must reflect what the customer wants rather than the challenges or convenience of the provider. Like most aging Baby Boomers, village members are accustomed to paying for convenience and demand great customer service. Moreover, these savvy consumers recognize that the limitations of conventional service delivery in today’s private-pay home care market—*e.g.* minimum shifts, advance no-

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## Village Fundamentals

Known by many names, the consumer movement exemplified by Boston’s Beacon Hill Village offers a senior living alternative that has quickly captured the imagination of aging Baby Boomers – today’s primary home care customer (on behalf of their aging parents) and tomorrow’s home care client. New groups are forming at a pace that has steadily accelerated since the Beacon Hill Village first attracted attention from the national press just five years ago. Although there is great variety among these pioneering organizations, most share the following characteristics:

- Consumer buy-in and ownership.
  - Emphasis on continuity of members’ lifelong connections and involvement with the local community.
  - Community-building activities selected by membership.
  - A member-services menu that typically including concierge and home care services.
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requirements, and inconsistent capacity to accommodate last-minute changes—will compromise their ability to continue living at home if they ever need constant care.

To meet the expectations of these new communities and the future market they foreshadow, the ideal home care provider will have the following characteristics:

- Ability to fill same-day requests and respond to last-minute changes.
- Ability to fill short and long shifts, responding to all member requests with a sense of urgency, whether the request is for one hour of respite companionship or two weeks of 24-hour care.
- Ability to provide 24-hour service availability and back-up, 365 days a year.
- Ability to make excellent matches between clients and workers, with the capacity to replace workers immediately if the client is unhappy with the match for any reason.

Any gaps in a company's capacity to respond to member requests, resolve problems, or accommodate or last-minute scheduling changes will put the company at a competitive disadvantage. Not only are these capacities critical to meeting customer-service expectations, they are also prerequisites for fulfilling a village's basic purpose: making it possible for members to live safely at home as long as they choose to do so.

## HouseWorks' Involvement

HouseWorks has been a strategic partner and the preferred home care provider of Beacon Hill Village since its inception in 2002 and was recently selected as the preferred home care provider for two new communities:

**Cambridge at Home** in Cambridge, MA and **The Watergate Initiative** in Washington, D.C.

HouseWorks is also in conversation with several new groups in the Washington and Boston areas, and provides information about the movement to interested consumers, providers, and members of the press.

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