

Volunteers help seniors age in place

Neighbors band together to maintain independence

By Victoria Colliver

Seymour Chatman needed a ride to his weekly Shakespeare group at the North Berkeley Senior Center last week while his wife, Barbara Blomer, received a little help with the gardening at their Berkeley home.

The couple didn't have to call a taxi or hire a gardener. Instead, they relied on a network of volunteers organized by Ashby Village, one of a growing number of "villages" whose members help each other with the goal of keeping older people healthy, socially active and able to stay in their homes as long as possible.

These are not villages in the traditional sense, but rather groups of people who join together as a nonprofit organization to provide each other with rides, business referrals, a calendar of social gatherings, classes and a range of other services from computer support to legal aid and medical help.

Blomer, whose 84-year-old husband developed dementia after suffering a stroke, said she sometimes feels overwhelmed and greatly appreciates the help from her village.

"What appealed to me is the sense of community of it and that it might help us to stay longer in our homes. And to be a part of a new movement is exciting," said Blomer, 68, a retired teacher. "If I really need something, I can call. It can be as simple as a plumber, but it can also be more complicated."

One of 100 villages

Ashby Village started in 2010 and is one of about 100 villages nationwide.

Many people do not have family members nearby to help them, yet most want to avoid going into assisted living or other institutions. Nearly 80 percent of people ages 50-64 said they would prefer to stay in their homes as they age, according to an AARP survey.

But the growing number of older Americans in the United States – often referred to as the "silver tsunami" – is expected to challenge the country's resources. The U.S. Census Bureau has estimated the population of people older than 65 will grow by 33 percent from 2005 to 2020. Meanwhile, the population of those under age 50 is expected to increase just 4 percent during that same period.

Sensing the need and the challenge, some civic-minded individuals took matters into their own hands and created the first “village” in Boston’s Beacon Hill area in 2001.

What started as a group of neighbors – formed to help with a variety of tasks from changing a lightbulb to driving each other to the grocery store or doctor’s visits – has expanded to include home repair referrals, social events and even partnerships with health care providers to allow members to receive special attention and attend educational programs.

“It’s a very exciting movement and I think it’s changing the culture of aging in this country, especially since people are generally living longer and they’re healthier,” said Sandra Coleman, board president of North Oakland Village, which serves people who live in north and central Oakland.

Tailored to fit

What each village offers varies to reflect the needs of its members, but they generally are nonprofit organizations that rely on their own members as volunteers as well as a corps of vetted nonmember helpers.

Villages charge annual membership fees to cover costs that, in the Bay Area, range from about \$500 for an individual to more than \$1,200 for a household.

“It’s not that this is such a new concept. Churches and fraternal organizations and neighbors have been doing this forever,” said Andrew Scharlach, UC Berkeley professor and director of the Center for the Advanced Study of Aging Services. “Part of what’s happening is we’re seeing less of a role of those organizations in people’s lives and less of a role of stable communities and neighborhoods in people’s lives.”

Scharlach, a leading researcher of the village movement, said villages fill the void, and seem to be making people both happier and healthier. In a survey of California village members, Scharlach found about 54 percent of those surveyed reported their quality of life had improved and 35 percent said they felt healthier. He is researching the impact of villages on health outcomes including falls, emergency department visits and hospital admissions.

Fast-growing region

California – and the Bay Area in particular – is among the fastest growing regions for villages, with more than 20 of them throughout the state and more than double that number in development, Scharlach said.

The first village in California, Avenidas Village in Palo Alto, started operating in 2004 with the help of its affiliation with an existing nonprofit senior center. It now has more than 350 members and has established alliances with health care organizations including the Palo Alto Medical Foundation, El Camino Hospital, Stanford and Kaiser Permanente.

North Oakland Village, a year and a half old, has 35 members and about the same number of volunteers. Ashby Village, which started operating in July 2010, has more than 250 members and 170 volunteers and has grown to cover parts of Oakland, Berkeley, El Cerrito, Albany and Emeryville.

“For Ashby Village, the personality and the culture of the people really support this idea of ... being part of a new movement that’s changing the way we’re aging, but also of having a deeper sense of connection,” said Andrew Gaines, the group’s executive director.

Some villages have received grants and other support from nonprofits including the Archstone Foundation, a Long Beach grant-making group focused on meeting the needs of the aging population.

Villages in the city

In February, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors gave \$50,000 each to two San Francisco villages – San Francisco Village, which began in 2009 and has more than 220 members throughout the city, and Next Village San Francisco, which has just over 60 members and serves the neighborhoods in the northeast quadrant of the city.

“In this city, 40 percent of the residents will be 60 years of age or older in 17 years. That is something our Board of Supervisors is recognizing and doing something about,” said Jonee Levy, 67, board president, member and volunteer for Next Village San Francisco.

As the number of senior villages increases, the concept is evolving and diversifying to meet different needs.

For example, on the waterfront bordering Oakland and Alameda, a developer hopes to begin construction this summer on a 41-unit condominium complex, called Phoenix Commons, for adults ages 60 and older that will incorporate the concept of the village.

Victoria Stone, community development director, described the “co-housing” community as a village, but with walls.

“Everybody has their own individual, private home, but then there’s a common area where you can share activities including cooking,” Stone said. “It’s a self-managed community. It’s just like the village works with volunteer supporting each other in it.”

Out in the suburbs

In Contra Costa County, residents of Lafayette, Orinda and Moraga have been working to get Lamorinda Village up and running. The group hopes to begin operating in fall 2014.

Ruth McCahan, a longtime Lafayette resident who serves as the group’s chairwoman, said the tasks of incorporating as a nonprofit organization, creating by-laws, and business and financial plans can be daunting. But, she said, the need is great in the area, especially because the homes are often far apart and people can feel physically and emotionally isolated.

Villages give people choices and they can participate as much or as little as they need, McChan said. And while some of services may seem small, they can mean the world to someone who needs the help.

“One very nice lady I spoke with said, ‘I haven’t turned my mattress since my husband died,’” she said.