

Groveland weighs Village concept

Helping to shape Village plans are Al Brizard (front), Luci Morris Tyndall and Ron Harms at Groveland's Little House senior center
Photo by Phil Schermeister

By Joan Jackson



ROVELANDER AL BRIZARD, 83, confesses that he's a "stubborn old man" – who now needs help changing that light bulb high in the ceiling.

Some 130 miles to the west, 75-year-old Marcia Freedman of Berkeley notes firmly that she doesn't climb ladders anymore.

Brizard and Freedman are among millions of retirees nationwide who would like to remain in their own homes as they age, but know they'll need a little help to do so.

Help is on the way for communities that, like Groveland and Berkeley, are studying or have already embraced the "Village" concept. This growing movement matches networks of local volunteers providing household services with older people determined to stay in their own homes.

A Village, members of the Southside Senior Services board say, could allow scores of area seniors to live independently for years, if not decades, longer.

"Our focal point at the beginning would be individuals who may be challenged staying in their own homes," says Ron Harms, president of Southside Seniors.

Staying put is a goal shared by seniors nationwide: A 2011 SAARP survey revealed that nearly 90 percent of people over age 65 want to stay in their homes as long as possible, and four of five believe their current home is where they will always live.

Southside, a nonprofit serving the needs of local seniors for 25 years and funded by grants, donations and fundraisers, this year launched a feasibility study aimed at determining whether a Village – already successfully operating in dozens of U.S. communities – would work in the Groveland area.

The volunteer-led study came back with a resounding "yes," pegging the village plan as a potential boon to Groveland's large senior population.

Excited by the information it had gathered, the Southside board this summer began presenting a high-level snapshot of the Village concept to community groups, churches and service clubs.

The focus has been not only on confirming the need, but identifying potential services, members, volunteers and funding sources. Planned are three membership tiers: individual, household and "sustaining," for those who aren't

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planning to use it now, but would like to have it in place for later. Organizers say it's too early to cite specific dollar figures, but there will be a plan for low-income individuals so that no one is left out.

Meetings halted mid-summer as the Rim Fire raged, but they are back on track and are expected to conclude in early 2014, according to Luci Morris Tyndall, Southside's administrative services coordinator.

Community input will be taken back to the board and in the spring Southside will make a decision about next steps. If directors proceed, they will seek grant funding to pursue the concept, Morris Tyndall says. The program tentatively would be open to anyone over 50.

"We're going to start slowly and expand as we can so that the program volunteers are not overwhelmed," adds Morris Tyndall. "It's for the simple things. I might call if I have a board loose on my porch, and I can't hold a hammer anymore. It's for the things you'd call a friend or neighbor for but don't want to impose."

The program, she adds, is not meant to replace paid services such as caregivers, gardeners or pet sitters. Rather it would serve as a safety net for people who need basic help to continue living safely at home.

The growing Village movement has its roots in New England. Just over a dozen years ago in Boston, a group of longtime Beacon Hill residents, facing issues similar to Brizard's and Freedman's, sought a practical way to remain in their own homes and beloved neighborhood as they got older.

Beacon Hill Village began delivering volunteer-based services to its then-70 members in early 2002. Members usually pay a modest yearly fee, often tiered to income levels.

Volunteers are both the heart and muscle of each village, delivering services ranging from transportation and minor home repairs to wellness programs, and social and educational activities.

Shortly after Beacon Hill Village launched, news media began spreading the word. The simplicity of the concept grabbed the attention of communities nationwide, and requests for information began pouring in. To cope with the inquiries, the Village to Village Network was created in 2010 to help communities establish and manage their own villages.

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More than 115 villages are now active in the United States, Canada, Australia and the Netherlands, according to Natalie Galucia of Village to Village. More than 100 others are in development and many more are in exploratory stages.

The concept landed in the Mother Lode two years ago when Brizard, Southside's vice president, became intrigued with news stories on the movement.

"I got really interested in it because I'm a perfect candidate," he says. "The Groveland area is pretty isolated and has a large senior population. Many people are as old as I am and will need help staying in their homes."

After he brought the concept to Southside's attention, board members began researching the idea, visiting Berkeley's successful Ashby Village in April 2012.

Ashby has 260 members, spans several densely populated Bay Area cities and offers a wide range of services. Freedman, who serves on the Ashby board, says the village creates a sense of community.

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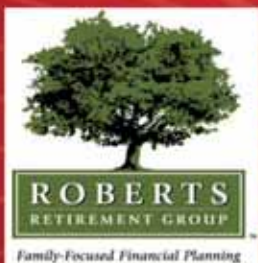
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Their village offers three all-member functions a year. In addition, it is divided into neighborhood groups, which offer additional gatherings according to members' needs. It all creates a sense of security.

"I haven't been ill," says Freedman, "but it's nice to know that there are people to shop for you – to look out for you."

In most villages, members are encouraged to volunteer and do what they can do to contribute to the program and each other. Many villages have software systems set up to track and bank volunteer hours. In Plumas County, the Community Connections program invites members to earn time credits by providing service. Services are traded hour-for-hour.

According to Galucia, villages in the network vary in size from as few as 20 members in some areas to more than 850 in Southern California's Desert Village; most average 150 to 200. Nearly 40 states now have fledgling or functioning villages, most in the east and west coast states.

"They're starting in the Midwest and catching on in the South," she adds. California has about 40.

Some villages have developed intergenerational programs with seniors mentoring high school students – giving advice or teaching a skill. In return, young people might help the seniors with technology – setting up a cell phone or computer.

While the array of services is broad, the biggest demand is for transportation.

With its WHEELS program, launched in 2012, Southside is ahead of the curve. The all-volunteer program offers free rides to residents 60 and over who are unable to drive. It enables them to get to the doctor, library, post office, bank or shops anywhere in Groveland from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. each weekday. Seniors can call 962-6952 to schedule rides. To volunteer, call Alex Wylie at 962-4697.

But would area seniors – many of them stubbornly independent like Brizard – take advantage of services a new village might offer?

Freedman joined Ashby Village in 2010 but only recently did she ask for any help – in sewing a curtain for her kitchen window.

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"I was surprised at how difficult it is to do," she says. "Our generation, and women in particular, has a hard time doing that. It's a learned skill."

Morris Tyndall says many people in Groveland see their future village as a way to pay it forward.

"It's easier to ask for help," she explains, "if I'm paying my membership dues."



Services a village might provide

Transportation • Hobby groups • Arts and crafts
Simple home repairs • Help with firewood
Help using electronics • Shopping assistance
Respite care • Daily phone calls
Help with meal planning • Friend visits
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