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IT TAKES A VILLAGE

A new model of senior living is taking hold across the country, with one in Lincoln Park at the forefront. Here's how a loose community of older folks is helping Chicagoans age in place.

BY TOM MULLANEY

Earlier this year, Diane Fitzgerald, 61, of Lincoln Park, faced a predicament. Her parents, both with serious health issues, were relocating to be near her from Long Island, New York.

Ms. Fitzgerald found retirement home fees too high, so she searched for another option.

She found her answer in Lincoln Park Village, a nonprofit membership community made up of people over 50 who live in their own homes, forming a virtual community. Essentially, it's neighbors helping neighbors age in place.

For annual membership of \$780, the parents now have "an extra set of eyes, ears and arms who are helping us do the heavy lifting," Ms. Fitzgerald says.

The village located mobility equipment for her mother, found local doctors among its health partners and introduced her parents to members living in the same apartment building. Ms. Fitzgerald is happy they have "an instant community."

The movement began in 2002 with Boston's Beacon Hill Village. Its success sparked the opening of 145 villages, with 100 more in development across 39 states and the District of Columbia.

In 2007, three Lincoln Park couples gathered, intent on bringing a village to Chicago. Michael Spock, scholar-in-residence at the Chicago History Museum, and his wife, Judy, was one of them. "We all had a sort of '60s mentality that, if we could think of something, we could make it happen," Mr. Spock, 81, says.



KENDALL KARMANIAN

Dianne Campbell is executive director of the Lincoln Park Village and founding president of the Chicago Children's Museum.

Two years of planning, plus \$225,000 in donations, including a \$60,000 grant from the Chicago-based M.R. Bauer Foundation, enabled the Lincoln Park Village to open in June 2009 with 70 founding members and Dianne Campbell, 65, founding president of the Chicago Children's Museum, as executive director.

Lincoln Park Village is Chicago's oldest and among the nation's five largest, at 386 members. Its success inspired two others in the Chicago area, in suburban Evanston and in the Streeterville neighborhood, which have about 300 and 100 members, respectively. Another is slated to start in November in Hyde Park with about 75 members. Susan Alitto, president of the Hyde Park board, says Lincoln Park "has been a source of inspiration to us."

Here's how the village concept works: An annual membership fee (in Lincoln Park, \$540 for a single member, \$780 for a couple; subsidies available) entitles members to all village activities and services. Called-in requests for volunteer help can include computer assistance, rides to doctors, shopping or a vetted handyman. One volunteer at Lincoln Park Village watered another member's vegetable garden for three weeks while another looked after a member's cats while he was away. Apart from fees for household repairs, no money changes hands.

Villages vary by locality, with some simply offering rides, meal delivery and medical care to homebound members. Lincoln Park and North Shore are more full-service models. All practice a "give

and get" philosophy. Those who receive help are encouraged to return the favor. Such outreach transforms a sprawling, anonymous city into an urban patch like Mayberry. Villages provide new members with guidelines of acceptable requests. Though staff say they try hard to be accommodating, they draw the line at requests for personal care assistance like heavy lifting or services better suited to a visiting nurse.

Lincoln Park Village members contributed 880 hours of volunteer time in May. Volunteers complement two paid staff, two part-timers and three college interns who operate out of a second-story office on North Clark Street.

'LONELINESS BUSTER'

Ms. Campbell calls Lincoln Park Village a "loneliness buster" that builds community connections. It offers around 30 volunteer-led activities each month, ranging from tai chi and fitness classes to memoir-writing workshops and a men's discussion group. Birdwatchers, book

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lovers, Scrabble fans and film buffs can find a group. Streeterville Village has a monthly men's luncheon called ROMEO (Retired Older Men Eating Out).

Villages also offer a key societal benefit besides boosting their members' mood and quality of life. They offset the financial burden on strapped cities and overwhelmed social service agencies.

Betty Dayron, 73, moved to Lincoln Park in 1986 and joined the village in 2008 because "I realized that I had little sense of belonging to the neighborhood. When I checked a member list in 2010, I realized I knew more than 100 people I didn't know before."

"The members, board and Dianne's leadership have created one of the most innovative and pre-eminent villages in the country," says Judy Willett, national director of Arlington, Virginia-based Village to Village Network, an association that helps communities establish and effectively manage villages.

Lincoln Park Village has staked out a



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village-wide leadership role on aging research. Ms. Campbell chairs Village to Village Network's research committee and serves on its advisory council.

Ms. Campbell sees Lincoln Park's community as an aging "test kitchen." It is assisting Dr. Lee Lindquist, a gerontolo-

gist at Northwestern Memorial Hospital, in developing a tool, "Plan Your Life Span." Dr. Lindquist says it enables seniors to have a voice in their care for future life events, a variant of "advance directives" for ill patients.

Lincoln Park Village also is working with a tech startup at the University of Chicago, Qualia Health, which conducted a 30-day study in June with 20 village members, testing an app that monitors participants' physical, mental and social health and offers medical advice.

Ms. Campbell has forged sponsoring partnerships with Rush University Medical Center, Charles Schwab Corp. and others to augment members' medical and financial needs.

MAKING IT WORK

Board members say sustainability is a challenge for the future. Lincoln Park's dues and special-event fees cover 60 percent of its \$400,000 budget. The goal, Treasurer Bob Spoerri says, is to reach

500 members with dues and earned income covering 70 percent.

Many older adults resist joining, village members say, out of ignorance or misconceptions about membership and mission, believing the villages are senior-care facilities for the frail and homebound.

Only 20 percent of Lincoln Park's members are over 80; 34 percent are under 70. Half of North Shore Village members are under 75, while in Streeterville, 85 percent are in their 60s and 70s. Members include retired Kraft Foods Inc. executive Char Damron, 66; Sidley Austin LLP partner and board member Mel Washburn, 69; and former 48th Ward Ald. Mary Ann Smith, 67.

All three villages have stretched their neighborhood boundaries to attract more members. North Shore Village is reaching into Winnetka, Skokie and Glenview. Streeterville has branched into the Loop, Gold Coast and New East Side, while Lincoln Park recruits in River North, Lakeview and Edgewater.

"You can never have too many friends or too many contacts," Ms. Damron says. "The village is an enormous resource pool."

Beyond networking among neighbors, says member Nancy Stevenson Greenberg, 74, Lincoln Park Village is "helping invent a different future for older adults in America."

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