

Arbor West Neighbors group aims to connect retirees, seniors with their community

[Caitlin Mullen](#)Pioneer Press
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A new community group is looking to support and connect older adults in the [Oak Park](#) area.

Arbor West Neighbors will look to take a grassroots approach to connecting young retirees and senior citizens with their community, offering programming and coordinating services, said Barbara Bodner, a board member with the group.

The group, which is applying for nonprofit status, is seeking input from Oak Park, [River Forest](#), [Forest Park](#) and Austin neighborhood residents to better guide its initial offerings; surveys are due Jan. 15.

The concept for Arbor West Neighbors was a finalist at last year's Big Idea competition, sponsored by the Oak Park-River Forest Community Foundation. The idea follows the format of the Village to Village Network — which got its start in the Boston area several years ago — establishing a pseudo-village to help older adults age in place, said Judy Smith, volunteer coordinator for Arbor West Neighbors.

Many older adults are looking for meaningful and purposeful ways to connect, and also wondering how they can remain in their homes as they age, she said. Arbor West Neighbors aims to address both issues, by hosting events that interest members and connecting neighbors with the hope that they may be able to provide support and assistance to each other.

"It's really meant to be individuals helping each other," Smith said of the group concept.

Smith, who is working toward her master's degree in gerontology at Concordia University Chicago and is a Kott Gerontology Institute scholar, joined the group this past fall to help with initial development.

She stressed that such a grassroots effort aims to see what community members want and need in terms of services, and how fellow neighbors may be able to help others. The group's first initiative has been to seek community input through a survey, asking residents about their passions and skills, social interests and support at home.

"It'll help us determine the direction of some of our programming," Smith said.

As baby boomers retire, Bodner said, there's an interest in re-establishing community connections. She mentioned the desire to see intergenerational involvement with the group, which is looking into opportunities for that with local universities.

Although AWN doesn't intend to duplicate what's already offered within the community, Smith said she hopes they can be a central information source to connect residents with all that is available.

"We kind of see ourselves potentially as being the hub of that," Bodner said.

Given the local townships' focus on seniors, there's a natural partnership with AWN, said Carla Sloan, River Forest Township supervisor. She said they've promoted the survey that's currently available and look forward to working together to help seniors age in place.

AWN will host a handful of events in the coming months, including a webinar with Atul Gawande, author of "Being Mortal," from 3:30-5:30 p.m. Feb. 13 at the River Forest Community Center, 8020 Madison St. The event is free, but attendees are asked to RSVP.

Smith said the group plans to kick things off with such events and later incorporate the service component, once they've assessed the type of support older adults want and need and what volunteers might be capable of.

The survey, which takes about 10 minutes to complete, can be found at the River Forest Community Center or the River Forest village office, or by request. For more information, visit www.facebook.com/ArborWestNeighbors, call 708-613-0152 or email arborwestneighbors@gmail.com.

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