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TOP STORY

First village geared toward the aging goes live at I'On in Mount Pleasant

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Members of I'On At Home (from left) Craig Rhodes, Topsy Barone, Peg Gaddy and Lori Bate meet to take a morning walk through the Eastlake section of the neighborhood Tuesday, March 7, 2017, in Charleston. Grace Beahm/Staff

Topsy Barone, 80, has been going to the symphony for years. She doesn't want to stop any time soon, but lately she's noticed it's been harder to drive at night.

She lives by herself, and her children have moved away. Barone said she worries about not being able to do what she wants to do in her later years.

"You have a tendency to just be isolated," Barone said. "Gradually you get to where you realize you're not doing anything."

She said she has heart troubles, but she walked three miles around her neighborhood with a group of members of a new organization Tuesday morning. That organization is I'On At Home, a community group, officially launched March 1, geared toward helping members age in their homes.

I'On At Home is part of a larger network of villages, organized by the Village to Village Network. A survey of the communities published in February reported there were 155 at the beginning of 2016, up from just 35 in 2010. This year will be the 15th anniversary of the village idea; the first was founded in Boston in 2002.

Seniors own and live in their own homes, but pay an annual fee — the average for an individual membership is \$431 — for access to a slew of useful resources. Volunteers help change lightbulbs, neighbors help with transportation to doctor's appointments and groups get together for social activities like a walking club or discussion on current events.

Barone hopes I'On at Home will help her to maintain her quality of life and stay in her home for as long as possible.

It used to be that the younger generation took care of the older generation as they aged. But with families spreading out more often, health experts and seniors say another fixture is beginning to take its place: The neighborhood.

"The generational resources aren't there the way they were 20 years ago," Thu Leshar said. Leshar is an organizer for Harleston Senior Village, a village still in the works in the Harleston neighborhood near the College of Charleston.

Barone said she is likely the prime example of a person who should join a village. She may be right: At 80 years old, she is nearing the age when she is most likely to need long-term care. Seven percent of Medicare recipients between 75 and 84 lived in long-term care facilities or community housing in 2009, compared to 22 percent of people 85 and older, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

The same HUD report noted that most seniors — 93 percent of senior Medicare enrollees in 200 — are already aging in place.

It may be difficult to ask a friend or neighbor if they can change the sheets on your bed. A main

idea behind the village movement is to normalize those questions and provide people with a way to fulfill those needs within the structure of their already-existing neighborhood.

"The organization establishes communication within the neighborhood that hasn't been there for a long time. People have lost touch with each other," said John Milkereit, a member of the Harleston Village steering committee. "People are beginning to identify who their neighbors are."

Heather Boger, director of the MUSC Center on Aging, said every person's situation is different. Yet she said the growth of the village movement and the idea behind it is "astounding."

People's mental states are known to decline in long-term care facilities, she said, and being able to stay among your familiar surroundings can have marked mental health benefits.

"There's a lot to be said about maintaining autonomy," Boger said.

Lori Bate, 58, who lives in I'On and helped launch the village there, sees it as a kind of insurance policy. She lived near the first village to be established, in the Beacon Hill neighborhood of Boston. That village, which first accepted fees in 2002, has grown to almost 400 members, according to its website.

Bate and other I'On residents thought the Mt. Pleasant neighborhood would be a good fit for a village of the same model. Members are 55 and older. They'll also consider people of all ages with disabilities. Leading the walking group at a brisk pace, Bate said she has little need for the village at the moment. But she wants it to be there as a kind of insurance policy as she ages.

"You like the community that you're in," Bate said. "We chose this place for a reason, and we want to stay."

At I'On, the median price of a home is \$874,000, according to the developer's website, though the homes often sell for much more. Natalie Galucia, director of the Village to Village network, said that's typical of many villages. Because those in the middle and upper class don't always qualify for government aid, the network has found they are the communities most likely to see a need for a village.

The Village to Village Network's greatest challenge at the moment is expanding the reach of villages to as many people as possible, Galucia said. It is one solution to caring for the rapidly

aging population in the U.S., she said, but right now the reach is minimal.

"We would love for it to be serving a greater percentage," she said.

Boger said she thinks the village model can be implemented in lower-income communities as well. But for the majority who don't have access to a village or anything similar, she suggested making desires about the latter years of life known to family and friends as early as possible.

"These conversations just need to be had," Boger said.

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