Aging Gracefully at Home

Older New Englanders plan for the future • by Nell Porter Brown

As board president of Staying Put in New Canaan, Tom Towers, M.B.A. ’64, believes in self-reliance. The Connecticut organization, modeled after Boston’s Beacon Hill Village, provides practical services, classes, and community connections for town residents choosing to grow old in their own homes. “This is about helping ourselves,” says Towers, a retired telecommunications executive. “It means ‘Don’t feel sorry for yourself getting old! Get off your duff and do something about it.’”

Such private, nonprofit groups are springing up in New England and elsewhere in the country as part of the popular movement dubbed “aging in place.” Staying Put opened for membership in October and offers transportation, help with errands, social gatherings and trips, a list of recommended tradespeople and home-healthcare agents, and a resource center for the elderly in a town where more than a third of the 16,000 residents are over the age of 50. Members pay an annual fee—$360 for a single person and $480 for a couple—for access to services. Staying Put will also take on a cadre of high-school volunteers (with their own extracurricular community-service requirements to fulfill) to do things like shovel walkways in the winter or help clean out a basement. “If a member is suddenly in the hospital, for example, we can get someone to walk their dog,” says Staying Put executive director Jane Nyce. “We’re expecting to find a long list of surprising things that people will need.”

The vast majority of seniors in America want to live at home as long as they can, according to AARP surveys. Group discounts on services, a collegial community of peers, and organized support through groups like Staying Put make that understandable desire more feasible than ever before.

The idea is so popular that within the last few years, groups have formed (or are in the planning stages) in Bronxville, New York (and other parts of Westchester County); Greenwich and Darien, Connecticut; Nashua, New Hampshire; Falmouth, Massachusetts; Burlington, Vermont; and Cambridge. Towers and other “senior social entrepreneurs” (as he puts it) are not opposed to assisted-living or retirement communities. But, they say, those places can often feel isolated and homogenous. Cambridge at Home board member Jay Lorsch, Kirstein professor of human relations at Harvard Business School, says the new group “enables us to live in our homes a lot longer than we’d otherwise be able to do—without going into retirement homes, which have be-
CAMBRIDGE, MA
Harvard Square - 9-room Colonial Revival townhouse, c. 1895, with landscaped yard on legendary “Professors Row”. Open living/dining with fireplace & bay, Master with bath & doors to deck, library with fireplace, high ceilings, c/a, and garage plus additional space. $1,325,000

CAMBRIDGE, MA
This stately Shingle-style/Tudor, c. 1897 is a landmark on Brattle Street. It has 14 rooms, a grand foyer & staircase, 35’+ LR, 10 fireplaces, built-ins, leaded & stained glass windows, high ceilings, porches, balcony & stone terrace. 2-car garage with additional parking. $4,300,000

BELMONT, MA
Designed by Carl Koch in 1945, this architecturally significant property has breathtaking views of Boston. The open living/dining room has a fireplace, built-ins, clerestory windows & access to a deck & landscaped grounds. With 4 beds, cozy library w/ fireplace this property is truly a remarkable home. $997,000

SOMERVILLE, MA
Located in a historic district, this handsomely renov. 4 bed, 2 1/2 bath Victorian is on a street with beautiful turn-of-the-century homes. Period details include a Palladian window, stained & leaded glass, fireplace, coved ceilings and natural woodwork. There is also c/a, a deck, patio, gardens and a garage. $827,000

CAMBRIDGE, MA
Mid Cambridge – This charming 2 bed condominium is in a classic brick building with elevator, live-in superintendent and parking. Handsomely renovated it has an open plan, kitchen with Caesar stone counters and stainless steel appliances, hardwood floors, custom built-ins and an elegant bath. $425,000

CAMBRIDGE, MA
Renovated penthouse in a turn-of-the-century building – Spacious open living/dining, bays, large eat-in kitchen w/ island, granite counters, stainless appliances & skylight, 2+ Beds, 2 ½ Baths, Master w/ fireplace, deck, 2-car garage & c/a. Near Harvard Yard, “T” and Darwin’s Cafe. $797,000

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care with nurses to someone who comes by for three hours a week to check blood pressure, or helps put the groceries away,” says executive director Kathy Spirer. (There is a fee structure for services beyond those covered by the basic membership cost.)

Board president Steven J. Stadler ’48, who has lived in his Mount Auburn Street condominium with his wife, Ingrid Stadler, Ph.D. ’59, for more than four decades, says about 40 people went on an October trip to Yale’s art museums. The social component of the program is critical to many seniors, he says: “We’re hoping to facilitate those bonds through exercise classes, walks, yoga, bridge groups, trips, and political luncheons.” So far, he notes, the membership includes a fair number of Harvard affiliates—a big draw.
for others retired from academia or professional lives who are keen on continuing to learn and be intellectually stimulated by their peers. “We’ve had a rapid ramp up,” he adds. “There seems to be a need for this organization in Cambridge, given the big response.”

Beacon Hill Village, which opened six years ago, pioneered this approach to independent living and now counts 430 members. The group has produced a comprehensive founder’s manual and accompanying DVD for agencies and individuals interested in starting their own stay-at-home organizations, and in April hosted an inaugural conference on the subject that drew about 250 people from across New England, the nation, and as far away as Australia. “These villages are literally popping up all over the country,” says executive director Judy Willett. Hot spots include Virginia, Maryland, and Washington, D.C. (including one in the planning stages for the Watergate apartments), and parts of California, New York, and New England (which claims a large chunk of the nation’s elderly population).

According to 2005 U.S. Census projections, by 2030 the six New England states will all be among the 21 states with the highest percentages of residents above the age of 65. The biggest projected jumps are for Maine (which, by 2030, would have the second-highest percentage of elderly people after Florida), New Hampshire (rising from thirty-seventh place to seventeenth place) and Vermont (which will move to eighth place). “By 2030, we expect that one in four people in Vermont will be 65 or older,” says Nancy Eldridge, executive director of Cathedral Square Corporation, a nonprofit senior-housing agency in Burlington. “We’re looking at how Beacon Hill Village might be applicable to Cathedral housing units in Burlington, and to the wider area around us.”

Eldridge is applying for grants to create a business model and gauge interest among local seniors in finding more innovative ways to meet their needs. It is not obvious that the Beacon Hill blueprint, set in a densely packed urban neighborhood with well-heeled clientele, is entirely transferable to Burlington, or to more rural settings, where se-
niors are more spread out geographically, she says. But there is no doubt the need for at-home services already exists, and that demand will only grow—partly, she explains, because of the 2005 Vermont Medicaid waiver that entitles every recipient to significant services at home. However, the infrastructure to deliver such services doesn’t yet exist, and meanwhile the number of nursing-home beds is shrinking. “Home healthcare agencies are doing what they can,” Eldridge adds, “but they are stretched for resources, money, and labor, and the entitlement doesn’t include the 24/7 care that nursing homes do, and which many people need.”

In Nashua, New Hampshire, the for-profit Life Coping Inc., which provides case-management assistance to the elderly in their own homes, is planning to inaugurate a village network in March that would offer its clients nonmedical and medical services, such as the care Eldridge refers to, à la carte. “I think this is exactly what the federal and state governments want: people who are organizing to care for themselves,” says Ellen Curelop, president of Life Coping. “For the people who can pay for these services, it could not be better.” Such private-pay systems represent the future “because the aging population is growing,” she reiterates, “and there will be increased demand for services and the possibility that there will not be enough services for everyone.

Money and long-term care services are always an issue.”

Staying Put in New Canaan deliberately set membership rates at a relatively affordable level for its location, and is building an endowment to help subsidize costs for lower-income seniors. “This is not an exclusive, elitist organization,” says director Jane Nyce. “We want this to have as broad an appeal as possible.” Elsewhere, rates vary depending on location and services: Beacon Hill Village charges $780 per household or $580 per individual for basic membership; Greenwich asks $650 per household and $500 for an individual; and Cambridge at Home costs $1,200 per couple and $900 per individual annually. (Membership fees cover varied services; each organization differs.)

Whatever the price, it is vastly less than the equivalent cost of moving into an assisted-living arrangement. Often local communities offer a range of government-funded elder-care services (so-

**NEW ENGLAND REGIONAL SECTION**

“There will be increased demand for services and the possibility that there will not be enough services for everyone.”
cial events, senior centers, transportation services, meals) that are available to all, regardless of income. In the affluent suburb of Greenwich, for example, there is plenty of help for senior citizens, says Marylin Chou, president of At Home in Greenwich. “But there is strong resistance to depending on town services,” she adds. “People don’t want to feel they are on the dole or feel that they are needy. There is also a lot of denial of age. I spoke to a 93-year-old doctor who says he doesn’t need any services yet. People don’t want to acknowledge that there may be a problem down the road—or tomorrow.”

For Tom Towers of Staying Put in New Canaan, these are questions of practicality. He and his wife, who have lived in the town for 39 years, sold their big home to one of their sons three years ago and moved into a condominium to live more simply, with fewer worries over maintenance, and to be closer to the center of town. They will use Staying Put services when needed, but, for now, Towers says he has thoroughly enjoyed the stimulating and challenging start-up aspects of the project and contact with others involved with the mission. “I don’t believe getting older need be ‘overwhelming,’ if you don’t feel sorry for yourself and you keep looking for interesting things to do,” he says. “We don’t ask for pity, but rather simply a chance to continue to enjoy life in familiar settings and with friends, old and new. Our notion of ‘Taking care of ourselves’ is very powerful.”