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The New Old Age

Caring and Coping

By Paula Span

A Community Time Bank

Joan Black took a serious tumble two years ago, climbing up on a stepladder to reach for a punchbowl. She was about to host one of her frequent patio parties for a regional theater company in Montpelier, Vt.

Ms. Black had been doing quite well in her ground-floor apartment downtown. But the fall broke a vertebra, and since then she's had trouble walking and standing for any extended period.

Once she worked as an interior designer. "I take a great deal of pride in my home," she told me in an interview. "But I couldn't keep up with the vacuuming and dusting. I couldn't garden. I used to start dreading winter in mid-July." (She couldn't shovel snow.) Living on Social Security payments since the recession plundered her savings, she couldn't afford to hire helpers. "Seeing things in my life go downhill became very depressing," said Ms. Black, now 80.

Happily, a city program called the Reach Service Exchange Network began operation in the fall of 2010, powered by a grant of \$1 million from the federal Administration on Aging. The network functions as a time bank. Montpelier residents of all ages join for \$25 and get access to a site listing requests

and offers: driving, pet care, reading aloud, help with grocery shopping, computer tutoring sessions and more.

"We ask all members to provide services to the network," explained Daniel Hecht, the network's director. "We think people of any age or level of ability can contribute."



Cara Barbero shoveling snow at the home of her neighbor Joan Black.

We've talked here about various alternatives to assisted living and nursing homes that allow people to age in place, or at least age in place longer. Co-housing, shared housing, villages, N.O.R.C.'s — the approaches and the economics vary, but the goals of independence and interdependence, which aren't contradictory in old age, are much the

same. People want community, but they also want privacy; most try to maintain their own households for as long as they can. “I told my son and daughter-in-law that I want to be carried out of my apartment,” Ms. Black said, voicing a common sentiment.

Can an organization like Reach make that happen? “Volunteering and increased social interaction are known preventions that mean better health,” Mr. Hecht pointed out.

So far, 200 locals have joined Reach, half of them over age 58. The staff runs criminal background and sex-offense checks on each member and reviews the motor vehicle records of anyone who has volunteered to drive. “This sort of vetting means nobody’s going to come to your home and steal your jewelry,” Mr. Hecht said.

As a group, Reach members currently contribute 300 hours of services each month. Ms. Black, for instance, has arranged to have a member vacuum and dust her apartment each week, which takes about two hours.

Cara Barbero, who lives a block or so away, shows up to shovel snow, often before dawn. “I get up in the morning, and the path is already cleared and salted and the car is cleaned off, and I can get out and go,” Ms. Black said.

In exchange, she operates the Reach Network’s information table at the farmers’ market most summer weekends and works at the guided tour desk at the restored state Capitol building. She still hosts soirees to benefit the Lost Nation Theater — though someone else handles the punchbowl — and she arranges a high tea each March that supports a college art gallery. By helping Ms. Black, Ms. Barbero has earned hours that she uses to get child care.

Friendships develop. Ms. Barbero’s daughters came over to sing “Jingle Bells” and deliver Christmas cookies to Ms. Black

last month; she invited them and their mother to her 80th-birthday celebration. She has signed up for classes that Reach is offering in the Alexander technique, which she thinks may ease her back pain.

As one downside of aging in place can be isolation and depression, “I’ve made it a point to get out and meet people,” Ms. Black said. “It keeps the juices going.”

But when the federal grant ends after three years, can Montpelier keep Reach going? It faces the same challenges as many elder care alternatives, including the much-touted village movement: It needs to raise money, if only for office space, Web site maintenance and at least a skeleton staff. And it needs to keep bringing in new members, including those younger and able-bodied. Its goal, in this small city of 7,500, is to attract 600 members who provide a collective 1,000 hours of service each month. That’s a far-off target.

Many of these experiments can keep older members in their homes when they need driving and dog-walking. As they age, a high proportion will eventually need help with the more basic activities of daily living — bathing, dressing, using a toilet. Few of these housing or community-building efforts are equipped to offer long-term care. “We can’t guarantee services to anyone,” Mr. Hecht acknowledged.

So Reach represents a model with limitations but also great benefits. “It reminds me of when I was growing up on Long Island and people just naturally helped and took care of each other,” Ms. Black said. “It’s tightened our community. I just hope it goes on forever.”

Paula Span is the author of “When the Time Comes: Families With Aging Parents Share Their Struggles and Solutions.”