"Federation Corner" column
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Neighbors helping neighbors
by Jim Humphrey, Chair, MCCF Planning and Land Use Committee

According to American Association of Retired Persons statistics, nine out of ten Americans over the age of 50 want to stay in their homes as they age.

The program for the January 11 meeting of the Montgomery County Civic Federation was an informational presentation by representatives of organizations created by residents in two county communities, Burning Tree and Bannockburn, which are designed to help neighbors remain in their homes as they grow older ("age in place"). In the past few years similar groups have sprouted up nationwide as part of a grassroots effort referred to as the "Villages" movement.

Villages give senior citizens an affordable option for remaining active and independent by organizing and delivering programs and a range of services including transportation to appointments, help with shopping or errands, yard care, and minor home maintenance (such as replacing light bulbs in ceiling fixtures, bringing in the newspaper, or taking trash cans to the curb for pick-up). Some Villages offer the services of volunteers free of charge to those in need, while others may charge for services on a sliding scale depending on an individual's or household's ability to pay. Still others are membership groups that offer a wide range of handyman and concierge services, like Beacon Hill Village in Boston which charges a $500 annual fee per person, or $800 per household.

Burning Tree Village (BTV) is the name of the group created by residents in the Burning Tree subdivision in west Bethesda. Harry Rosenberg, Vice President of the BTV Board of Directors, explained to attendees at the MCCF January meeting that his group chose not to hire an Executive Director, which places greater responsibility for running the organization on the members of the Board. The group now has 125 members, in this neighborhood of 441 households, with 35 volunteers signed up to provide help to their neighbors when needed.

From the outset, the founders of Burning Tree Village realized that the group should be incorporated and register with the Internal Revenue Service as a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit entity. But the issue of liability--the remote but real possibility that the group or its participants might be sued--did not occur until the issue was raised by early volunteers. Burning Tree Village now partners with Senior Connection, a faith-based organization supported by a county grant, which provides the group with insurance coverage up to $1 million per incident and coordinates requests for BTV volunteer services. (Other groups may opt to rely on the personal liability clause in their volunteer's own homeowners insurance, or the provisions of Maryland's Good Samaritan law, to protect against lawsuits.) The website for this group is www.BurningTreeVillage.org.

The members of the Civic Association in the Bannockburn neighborhood, also in Bethesda, chose a slightly different approach when they created an organization called Neighbors Assisting Neighbors (NAN) just more than a year ago. Dick Ramsey, a Bannockburn delegate to the Civic Federation, explained that 50% of the 460 households in Bannockburn had responded to a survey about starting such a group, and 80% of the respondents were in favor. One surprising result of the survey was that many senior citizens in the neighborhood volunteered to help out with the program, but stated that they themselves did not need assistance.

NAN is a non-membership organization that aims to offer volunteer assistance not just to seniors but to anyone in need, for example parents needing a babysitter in an emergency, and even extends their service to households beyond their association borders. The group recently coordinated a fire inspection program,

with volunteers accompanying Fire Department personnel around the neighborhood to inspect or install smoke detectors in private homes. NAN also sponsors a Wise Elder program, an effort that promotes intergenerational exchange by teaming senior citizens with sophomores and juniors at nearby Walt Whitman High School. And NAN hopes to add a social component in the near future by hosting potluck dinners in the clubhouse owned by the Civic Association. The website for this group is www.Bannockburncommunity.org.

Facilitating the ability of older adults to age in place was identified as a top priority by participants in the County Executive Leggett's Senior Summit held on November 20, 2008. Summit participants further identified the need for technical support to neighborhoods interested in the creating a Village model for facilitating neighbor-to-neighbor help as a short-term goal towards addressing this priority. And so this past January 21, County Council member Roger Berliner (D.-District One) hosted a program at the Bethesda-Chevy Chase Regional Services Center for citizens to share information and brainstorm on approaches to dealing with challenges in establishing a "Village" model for communities in the county.

Kenneth Hartman, the B-CC Regional Services Center Director, has been instrumental in assisting citizens throughout the county investigate how to create a Village organization in their neighborhood, from helping develop questionnaires and analyzing the results to providing information on how to register as a corporation and get non-profit status. The Center also helps groups that have limited funding with photocopying and printing needs, and assists in finding computer software to aid groups in matching registered volunteers with those requesting assistance. You can contact Mr. Hartman, or get information on the Villages movement in Montgomery County, by accessing the Center's website at www.montgomerycountymd.gov/bcc.

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to theelms518@earthlink.net