

Banding Together to Stay at Home

A new community aims to extend seniors' independence

By Kerry Hannon

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Alice Salamon, 87, has resided for nearly four decades in a light-filled, three-story home in Cambridge, Mass., that brims with memories, mementos of her travels, and photos of generations of family. Through the kitchen window, the native of Czechoslovakia can gaze out at her serene Japanese garden, yet she is not far from Harvard Square, a mélange of funky shops and ethnic restaurants, students, artists, and professionals. "I'm in the center of things, and I love it," she says. She has no intention of moving out.

Problem is, her eyesight is fading, and she can no longer drive. So when she received a mailing inviting her to join Cambridge at Home, a new nonprofit cooperative community of aging homeowners banding together to share resources, she knew instantly it was for her. The chief selling point: free weekly rides to and from the grocery—she's an avid baker.

Cambridge at Home, which began operations October 1, is one of a new breed of retirement communities that allow people to continue living in their own homes as they receive organized support. These types of communities are in their infancy, so their long-term success remains uncertain. But for seniors who are reasonably healthy, they promise a way to delay or perhaps avoid the need to move in with family or to a facility offering round-the-clock care.

Staying put. "We want to stay where we are," says Steven Stadler, 80, president of Cambridge at Home's board of trustees, who has lived in Cambridge since 1943. Bingo at an assisted-living community is not what he and his wife, Ingrid, 77, are looking for in their twilight years. "We want the intellectual stimulation of a multi-age community with multirace diversity," he says. "We like the social networking and want to have access to first-class services when and if we need them."

For an annual membership fee—\$1,200 per couple and \$900 for an individual—Cambridge at Home gives city residents 50 and older access to discounted home healthcare, free transportation, and shopping assistance, including help carrying groceries. Stadler and like-minded seniors began organizing the group in April 2006. So far, about 200 households have signed up, for a total of 300 members ranging in age from 65 to 98. For now, the outfit is operating solely on fees, which keep it out of reach for the less affluent. Boston's Beacon Hill Village, a similar community that opened in 2002 and has more than 400 members, raises funds to subsidize membership for moderate-income members, who pay as little as \$100 a year for an individual. Other such communities are sprouting up in moneyed enclaves of Washington, D.C.; Palo Alto, Calif.; and New Canaan, Conn.

Elsewhere in the country, certain neighborhoods and apartment buildings with high densities of elderly residents are participating in pilot programs that bring healthcare and transportation services to them. These [naturally occurring retirement communities](#), or NORCs, have been gathering steam since 1986, when the first one began in New York City; there are now about 80 nationwide. They are funded through public-private partnerships that depend on both government and philanthropic dollars. Social workers and residents coordinate group meals, lectures, and art workshops. A free shuttle is typically available for trips to the supermarket. And a nurse practitioner regularly offers on-site blood pressure clinics, assessments, and other health-related services.

The new, deliberately organized retirement communities, by comparison, tend to offer an even broader basket of services. Through outside contractors such as HouseWorks, Cambridge at Home members enjoy 10 percent discounts on a wide range of live-in and hourly home care, including help with bathing and dressing, medication management, skilled monitoring following surgery, and even meal preparation. And the group has partnered with Mount Auburn Hospital and Cambridge Health Alliance to provide easy access and extra attention. The fitness-minded can join free exercise classes and group walks.

Salamon doesn't need a lot of the services...yet. But she's realistic that she might in time, and she likes knowing that with one call to the community's main office, she can talk to a real person and make arrangements for a reliable professional to come to her home. The staff keeps an up-to-date list of prescreened providers to call for home repairs, housecleaning, computer help, pet care, and more.

Stepping out. A range of social and cultural activities is also offered each month, from book groups and poetry readings to private film showings and docent-led museum tours. The social forays get Salamon out to do things she might not have done otherwise. She's been on an all-day trip with 39 other members to New Haven, Conn., to visit Yale's art gallery and its Center for British Art. Next up: an "Opinionated Lunch" and lecture on Campaign 2008, given by a professor at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government at the trendy restaurant Henrietta's Table.

"People weave their social web, and it provides a mutual protection," says Janice Blanchard, director of the Office on Aging in Denver and a guru of the senior housing movement. "It's a social form of long-term-care insurance." Just being in your home won't save you from loneliness, boredom, and hopelessness—the three plagues often associated with nursing homes, she says. "Organizations like Cambridge at Home promote a deliberate consciousness to be a darn good neighbor.

"I've already met some new members who live in my neighborhood," says Salamon. "We can help each other. And as long as my mind is all right, I can stay here."