

Newton TAB: Letters

Wednesday, May 17, 2017

Looking out for Newton's seniors

I wish to respond to Marian Knapp's article that appeared in the Tab's April 20 issue. Ms. Knapp refers to, and rightfully subscribes to the AARP aim to "help people live easily and comfortably in their homes and communities as they age." She also mentions that "individuals and organizations around the world are taking strong, initial steps" toward implementation of this vision, but nowhere does she mention Newton at Home, an outstanding community-based nonprofit organization that thoughtfully provides numerous services and opportunities for older Newton residents.

Membership is available to anyone living in a Newton household in which one individual is 60 years of age or older. Newton at Home also offers a limited number of reduced-fee memberships to residents with modest incomes.

Newton at Home grew out of the efforts of a handful of longtime Newton residents who, 10 years ago, began meeting regularly to explore an age-friendly village concept and plan for a village in Newton. As others heard about this effort, more people joined this fledgling group and together they explored various models that might work for Newton. This group spent four years thoroughly researching these ideas and in 2011 Newton at Home opened with its first members and volunteers.

Currently Newton at Home has over 200 members and 100 volunteers. The organization is modeled after small towns of the past where neighbor helped neighbor and social networks were tight.

Ms. Knapp mentions that "there is an underground of social problems such as isolation and loneliness that rarely comes to the surface." The founders of Newton at Home were keenly aware of this issue and thoughtfully developed an organization that effectively deals with this concern. Some of the benefits provided to Newton at Home members include rides wherever the resident requests (not just within the boundaries of Newton), affinity groups (book clubs, current events discussion groups, theater outings, movie club, dining group, conversational Spanish, gardening and touring, history group and more), in-home computer and technical assistance, help with household tasks, a winter buddies program, health and wellness forums, and referrals to vetted and reliable service providers.

Ms. Knapp suggests that while much attention is paid to the baby-boomer population, those older than this cohort are being overlooked; not so for Newton at Home where fully half its members are in their 80s and 90s. Because volunteers will drive Newton at Home members to any and all events, these older members continue to remain connected to their community and friendships are fostered and sustained.

Like Ms. Knapp, I am a longtime Newton resident, having lived in the community for 48 years. I am a social worker who values community efforts that improve the quality of life for all people and I firmly believe that collaboration between private and public organizations is essential if communities are to broadly serve the needs of the wider community. Newton at Home is a fine example of such a citizen-based community effort that today serves a valued segment of our population.

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