NEWTON AT HOME: REMAINING IN ONE'S HOME SWEET HOME

By Hillel Bromberg

Home. The very word conjures images of comfort, relaxation, family and familiarity. We all like the security of our habitual surroundings, but as people age, it can be increasingly difficult to function the way we used to.

Since 2011, Newton at Home (NAH) has been supporting people who want to remain in their own homes and just need a little extra help to do so. With the help of a large cadre of volunteers, NAH provides practical services like transportation, grocery shopping and home repair (think changing light bulbs and swapping out screens) and technical help with computers, phones and other electronics.

But that's just the beginning. Since many seniors no longer drive, they are in danger of becoming isolated, so in addition to friendly visits, NAH gets members out to events, field trips and performances. They arrange lectures on many subjects and provide rides to get there. There is a regular dining club at area restaurants and a lunch four times each year at Newton North High School's Tiger Loft restaurant. For $6, participants get a full meal prepared by the school's culinary students plus entertainment by a choral group or other performers.

That sounds like enough to arrange, right? We're not done. Newton at Home maintains a list of vendors who provide more complex or specialized services like carpentry, plumbing, snow removal, painting, etc. All vendors are screened for safety and reliability, and many offer discounts to members. NAH creates opportunities for intergenerational friendships as well. Fesssenden School students participate in board games days and semi annual yard clean ups. Once, the mother of a 12-year-old called to say that the pre-bar mitzvah project that her son wanted to do was to play chess with a senior and discuss economics. NAH set him up with a member who was a prominent economist. Four years later, they are still playing and talking regularly.

Newton at Home was inspired by Beacon Hill Village, where a group of friends gathered in 1999 to talk about their future. They wanted to be active, taking care of themselves and each other rather than moving to assisted living facilities, so they developed a grassroots model of maintaining independent living through volunteer support. Today, there are more than 200 villages open and another 150 in development in the United States.

Newton at Home began organizing in 2007 and officially opened in April 2011 as a nonprofit membership organization. "Our culture isn't what is used to be with families nearby helping each other," explains executive director Maureen Grannan. "Many of our members have children, but they are not necessarily nearby or available because they are busy raising their own children. There needs to be something to fill that gap, and that's what NAH does so well."

Grannan has endless stories about the fascinating lives that members have lived and the close connection between members and volunteers. "Everyone has something to offer as a volunteer," she says. "Sometimes they just don't know what it is." She once talked to a former radio and TV anchor who has retained his sonorous pitch. The next day, she got a request from a 92-year-old member who simply requested a daily call to check on her. Grannan exclaimed that "It was a match made in heaven. They have been talking every morning for the last four years." If he can't get through, he calls NAH immediately so they can send local police to her door for a well-being check. "We have supports around town who can assist with meeting our members' needs," she concludes.

Newton at Home is a rapidly growing organization that provides what for many is the best of all possible worlds: the ability to remain safely and independently in their own home. For more information about membership or to volunteer your own time and energy to help others live a full life, call NAH at 617-795-2650. ■