



MARK HARRISON / THE SEATTLE TIMES

NEST volunteer Jerald Forster, right, regularly visits friend Jerry Lee to go for walks or to help around the house.

NEST information

Who: Northeast Seattle Together — NEST — is a beginning nonprofit organization dedicated to creating a "village" to ensure elderly people continue to live safely and confidently in their own homes and neighborhoods. Volunteers would provide the bulk of support, from yard work to pet care.

What: Board members are trying to raise \$140,000 in seed money in the next year to pay for an office and two staff members. NEST is \$100,000 shy of its goal. Donations may be made online at www.nestseattle.org/get_involved.html

Cost: NEST is open to people of all ages, though the intent is to serve elderly or physically challenged members. After its launch, the annual cost will be \$600 for one member and \$900 for two people in one household.

Where: NEST is reaching out to residents in the Bryant, Hawthorne Hills, Inverness, Laurelhurst, Maple Leaf, Matthews Beach, Meadowbrook, Ravenna, Roosevelt, Sand Point, University District, View Ridge, Wedgwood and Windermere neighborhoods.

More information: Visit www.nestseattle.org or call 206-525-NEST (6378).

Grass-roots NEST to help elderly stay in home

By Sonia Krishnan
Seattle Times staff reporter

The rhododendrons and azaleas are growing a little faster than she'd like, and the lawn seems in constant need of a trim, but the 84-year-old widow can only do so much.

Don't get her wrong. She's not playing the poor-me card, she says. She just loves living in the Wedgwood home she and her husband of 55 years bought in 1973.

Then he died last year and, along with the searing loneliness, came the exhaustion of trying to keep up with a four-bedroom, two-bathroom house.

"To move out of the house that you've lived in for so long ... I don't want to," said the woman, who asked that she not be named because she lives alone and feels vulnerable.

"But if I have to, I have to."

A new nonprofit in Seattle hopes to keep seniors from making that hard choice.

Known as Northeast Seattle Together, or NEST, the group is attempting to build a "virtual village" and serve as a stand-in for family members or friends who can't be there to help all the time with the little things. It would be the first such program in the state, modeled after similar villages on the East Coast.

It works like this: Members will pay an annual fee of \$600 for neighbors to come over and help with everyday tasks — taking out the garbage, for instance, or getting to a doctor's appointment or social events.

"For many people, the issue in staying where they are is a matter of getting support in fairly ordinary ways," said Jeanne Carpenter, president of the NEST board.

The program now operates informally on a small scale but will launch officially sometime next year if its board can raise \$100,000 by the end of December for office space and a staff of two.

Once in place, it would rely on a database of local volunteers who must live in Northeast Seattle and successfully undergo background checks, she said.

Already, a few dozen people of all ages have expressed an interest in volunteering, and some have taken the initiative with their own neighbors, Carpenter said.

Jerald Forster is one. Even though he's 74, he said, he didn't hesitate to lend a hand to Jerry Lee, who lives nearby in the Ravenna/Bryant area.

Lee, 72, has a form of Parkinson's disease, so Forster comes over regularly to go on walks with him or to help out around the house.

The two have been friends for years, Forster said, "but we're closer now than we've ever been."

That's exactly NEST's mission: to keep seniors engaged and help them "age in place" as long as possible, an option 90 percent of retirees say they prefer over moving to costly assisted-living or retirement centers, according to a 2006 AARP study.

There are other services to help the elderly stay where they are, such as specialists who remodel homes, or senior support networks that offer up experts on health care and finance. But NEST is strictly grass roots and neighbor-to-neighbor, Carpenter said.

Aging in place is gaining momentum as a huge glut of baby boomers hits retirement age. According to the Census Bureau, the number of people in the U.S. 65 and older is projected to more than double between now and 2050, from 39 million to 89 million.

And who will look out for them? The issue, aging experts say, is rooted in contemporary culture. Going to school, getting a job and moving away from home are rites of passage for many young people in the U.S. that often leave their aging parents with no family network to step in and help.

To help address that void, more than 40 virtual villages have opened around the country in the past eight years, and 60 more are in the works.

The first one — Boston's Beacon Hill Village — was created in 2002 and now has more than 400 members 50 and older.

For \$600 a year, they get a "concierge service" — essentially, referrals for anything from a good plumber to transportation to a baseball game or trip to the museum — and a buddy system that pairs them with volunteers who check in on them regularly, said Judy Willett, its executive director.

In Wedgwood, the elderly widow said she heard about the effort to get NEST launched and says that once it's fully running she will arrange for a volunteer to help her with yardwork and grocery shopping.

She has no children, and with her extended family still living in Germany, it's the only way she'll be able to stay in her home, she said.

She and her late husband both loved the arts. They moved to America in 1956, first to California and then to Seattle in 1973 for its cultural scene.

They would go out on the town several times a week to catch the symphony or the opera and built a music room in their home with a couch, three easy chairs and bookshelves. It was a great life, she said.

"Then there I was, alone."

Things that never seemed to matter much when he was alive, like bringing groceries up the stairs from car to kitchen, suddenly did.

She's still able to drive and meet friends, but they are getting fewer and fewer.

For her, the house is the one constant in her life, where she listens to music and watches the rain fall outside her living-room window. The floors may creak, but they are her floors.

"Every house has its problems, but you know where you are and you have the memories and you'd love to live there for as long as you can," she said.

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