

The Philadelphia Inquirer

Inquirer.com

UNEQUALLED COVERAGE • UNLIMITED ACCESS

November, 2014

It can take a village to help remain independent

By Neville E. Strumpf

The statistics are startling: Soon, 25 percent of the U.S. population will be over 65, and 70 percent of us will need care of some kind either in our homes or in an institution.

These statistics, which were aired during a segment on the realities of aging on *CBS Sunday Morning* last month, should serve as a wake-up call to all of us. Putting our heads in the sand and hoping for the best are not viable strategies. Fortunately, those of us who live in and love the opportunities in Philadelphia have options.

The *Sunday Morning* feature put the spotlight on Beacon Hill Village in Boston, the first in

what is now a national movement to help elderly people stay in their own homes but provide access to assistance as needed. The "village" movement began in 2001, with the group in Boston, but now boasts more than 140 villages across the country, with 100 more under development.

Philadelphia currently has three such villages. The largest and oldest of them is Penn's Village, where I serve on the advisory council. It offers neighbor-to-neighbor volunteer services in an area that stretches from Washington to Girard Avenue, and from river to river.

Other villages that have been established in the area include the East Falls and Mutual Mount

Airy communities in Philadelphia, and the Brandywine Village Network in Delaware.

Time and again, the village network proves itself a boon to members who find it difficult to get around as easily as they once did. Hundreds of men and women in our neighborhoods already embrace Penn's Village in a variety of capacities — whether receiving services or acting as volunteers or serving on committees.

What do villages do? Primarily, they open the doors to a number of opportunities to invest in your neighborhood. Nearly everyone can benefit in some capacity.

At Penn's Village, members — we call them villagers — receive services such as transportation

to medical appointments or grocery shopping, training on mobile phones or tablets, and carefully vetted lists of local service providers. If you need a ceiling light bulb changed, a volunteer will climb a ladder to do that for you. Or he'll put together that lamp you ordered through the mail. Members pay annual dues, and the volunteer-provided services are free.

In many ways, these villages are ageless. Men and women within the community frequently find they play changing roles. Many of our members have served as volunteers at some point but then later found that they could use the same kind of help they once provided.

There is a power to these grass-

roots organizations that tailor their services to local needs. They help all of us make a reality of the dream to stay in our own homes, and as independent as possible, as we age.

We are lucky to have a variety of such organizations in our area. I encourage adults of all ages to learn more about the services offered to them, or to loved ones, without delay. Help, and peace of mind, are available.

Neville E. Strumpf is a retired professor at the University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing, past director of the gerontology nurse practitioner program, and founding director of the gerontology research center. ✉ strumpf@nursing.upenn.edu