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Programs offer seniors option to age at home
More assistance projects show growing older doesn ' t have to mean going away

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NEW HYDE PARK, N.Y. More assistance projects show growing older doesn't have to mean going away

NEW HYDE PARK, N.Y. -- When Edna and Kenny Geiman moved to Campbell Street in 1950, it was a raw, treeless tract of starter homes, some of the thousands built in the New York suburbs after World War II for veterans and the baby boom they were creating.

"Every house was servicemen," says Edna Geiman, 82, who met her husband when both served in the Marines. "There were 42 kids moving in at the same time. Everybody had a VA mortgage."

Now the kids and grandkids are mostly grown up and gone, and, in many of the houses, only seniors remain. Like 5,000 other neighborhoods across the country, according to an AARP estimate, this patch of Long Island is a "naturally occurring retirement community," or NORC, a demographic term used to describe neighborhoods where at least 40% of the residents are older than 60.

The Geimans aren't interested in senior housing, assisted living or moving to North Carolina to be near one of their four children.

"I would rather stay in the house I stayed in all my life," Edna Geiman says.

A new program called Project Independence, funded by the state, the town and a social service agency, is designed to help the Geimans do that.

The program, managed by an executive director and an advisory board of residents, has provided Edna Geiman with a temporary caregiver for Kenny, 85, who is fading into dementia. It also has provided her with taxi rides to medical appointments since she can no longer drive, a doctor who makes house calls, and the name of a reasonably priced electrician because her husband can no longer do home repairs.

Project Independence is one of a growing number of programs that make it possible for residents of senior communities to stay in their homes rather than move to senior housing or nursing homes.

The first NORC program began in New York City in 1985. There are now such programs in 25 states, funded by grants from government, foundations such as the Denver-based Daniels Fund and social service agencies.

A struggle for funding means the growth has been sporadic. Only New York has a state program that designates NORCs and funds programs. Most federal money for the programs -- about \$23 million since 2001 -- has come from "earmarking," funds obtained by a member of Congress for a specific program. Earmarking, however, is a practice the Bush administration and the new Democratic congressional leadership have vowed to end.

In October, Congress included NORC programs in the reauthorization of the Older Americans Act, which gives grants to states for services for seniors. Money to fund the programs has yet to be appropriated by Congress.

If federal money comes, the programs could get a big boost, but money for all programs for seniors has been increasingly scarce, says Rob Goldberg of United Jewish Communities. "Our focus in this Congress will be to get that program funded," he said. UJC is the umbrella organization for Jewish social service agencies and perhaps the biggest champion of NORC programs: It has funded 41 programs.

Those who advocate for services for seniors say expanding the programs is urgent.

As baby boomers age, the number of seniors will explode: the Census Bureau predicts that by 2030, almost 20% of the population, or 71.5 million people, will be older than 65, compared with less than 13% now.

Not only will many of those seniors want to grow old at home, some of them will have to.

"You can't possibly build enough senior housing for every senior," says Julia Pierson, a senior housing consultant in Baltimore, where there is a NORC program.

Even today, the wait for federally subsidized senior housing is more than a year, and 10 people apply for each vacant apartment, according to an AARP study released Jan. 9.

Most NORC programs, which provide services for free or for an annual membership of \$25 or so, are aimed at people of low or moderate income.

The programs get seniors signed on to existing services such as home-delivered meals, home health aides, and respite care, which provides temporary help to give a break to someone caring for a family member.

The programs also emphasize getting isolated seniors out to socialize, setting up a system for neighbors to check on each other and organizing social activities such as lectures and classes.

Also, younger seniors often are recruited to take care of home repairs.

"This notion that 'it takes a village' does not apply just to children," says Fredda Vladeck, who founded the first NORC program and is director of an aging-in-place initiative for the United Hospital Fund, a New York research and grant-making foundation.

"We need to go back to transforming our communities into good places to grow old," Vladeck says. "If we don't, we're still going to be doing aging services one hip fracture at a time. And that's not an effective way to do it."

----- INDEX REFERENCES -----

COMPANY: AARP INC

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