

Westerly Village aims to help older adults stay active and independent; venture debuts July 1

By Nancy Burns-Fusaro, Sun staff writer



Members of the Westerly Village, a community venture designed to help older adults residing in Westerly remain active, connected and independent, include, from left, Bob Rieger, Cassie Skobrak, Doreen Stafford, Sue Rieger, Laurie Meisner, Carol Fortier, Stevie Champion and Doug Champion. The venture debuts July 1.

Harold Hanka, The Westerly Sun

WESTERLY — A grassroots movement that began on Boston's Beacon Hill two decades ago, has branches around the country and is designed to help seniors remain safely in their homes has taken firm root in Westerly.

On July 1, Westerly Village will make its official debut with dozens of members ready, willing and able to lend a hand to help their older neighbors feel safe and supported. A launch party is scheduled for July 25 and a membership drive is currently in full swing.

"We're an organization with a plan and an idea," said a cheerful Laurie Meisner, a member of the Westerly Village Steering Committee and one of the group's leaders. "We have about 22 members ... wonderful people who are active, smart, funny, talented and ready."

The village mission, she said, is to help older adults remain active, connected and independent in the homes and communities they love.

"We want to support older adults so they can remain in their homes and neighborhoods," she said, "with a little help from their friends."

Meisner, 68, a Massachusetts native who moved full time to Westerly with her husband, Bill, 69, about 14 years ago, said members of the group are already prepared to do all sorts of things —

from running errands, to helping with household chores and offering technical support — all in a “neighbor to neighbor” sort of style.

Back in October 2020, Meisner explained, a small group of people living and working in Westerly was inspired by the national “Village” movement and by what’s been accomplished by the Village Common of Rhode Island and other community villages around the country.

Westerly Village is officially part of a national movement in a “Village-to-Village Network” that includes more than 250 villages in more than 40 states and more than 100 in development.

“We began meeting to discuss the idea of creating something local,” Meisner said. “The more people we talked to, the more people were interested.”

Conversations continued during the “Community Conversations” series sponsored by the Westerly Library and Wilcox Park, which focused on seniors and aging in Westerly.

The insights, ideas and struggles that were discussed were invaluable as the group met with other community organizations with the goal of helping Westerly become a more age-friendly place to live, said Westerly Library Reference Librarian Cassie Skobrak.

“It’s really exciting that it’s coming to fruition,” Skobrak said Friday afternoon as she chatted with steering committee members in Wilcox Park about next week’s big debut. “We’ve been talking about it for so long ... I am thrilled.”

The Westerly Village, Meisner said, is essentially “a network of neighbors helping neighbors with direct individual and household support and with broader social and resource connections.”

The idea, she said, is to match, when feasible, the unique interests and talents of Village volunteers — all of whom have been fully vetted — to the unique individual needs requested by members.

Some of the services offered could be help with yard work or household chores that have become challenging, like hanging pictures, changing screens, flipping mattresses or changing light bulbs. Or maybe there’s a leaky faucet that needs fixing, Meisner added, or grab bars that need to be installed. Help with cellphones, computers, remote controls and smart TVs will also be offered, as will help with internet use, information about 3D printing and help learning programs like Microsoft Excel or Word. Sometimes people need rides to doctor’s appointments or someone to pick up a prescription at the pharmacy. Other times, maybe someone just needs a check-in call or visit.

Westerly Village is made up of members who are receiving the services too, she said, then volunteer to provide them to others. Members, therefore, are volunteers as well, although they don’t have to be.

Anyone who is a full- or part-time resident of Westerly can become a member, and while membership is not “age exclusive,” Meisner said, most members will be seniors who are 50 and older. There is no set fee to join, either. Members pay what they can afford.

“Because we are just getting our feet wet, we are offering two months of free membership to anyone who joins before August 1st,” Meisner said.

The group is also working on its own website, which is still under construction. In the meantime, she said, people interested in learning what a typical village offers can visit providencevillage-eri.org

There will also be a social component to the village, Meisner said, with plans to organize activities like outings to museums, lectures and concerts, and events like picnics and book and theater clubs.

Also being considered are seasonal gatherings, cocktail parties, yoga lessons, knitting groups and walking buddies.

Meisner said there are also plans to reach out to local scouts and church- and school-based youth groups to help build the volunteer base.

Suzanne Francis, a former Westerly resident who lives in Providence and serves on the board of the Village Common of Rhode Island, also serves as a mentor for the local group. The common is committed to bringing the benefits of the village movement to older adults across Rhode Island, she said.

“Westerly is number four,” she said, pointing out that there are established villages in Barrington, Providence and the Edgewood section of Cranston.

Francis, a retired consultant, said a 2019 community assessment conducted by L+M Hospital examining supports in place for older adults, served as driving forces behind the Westerly village project. After reviewing the assessment results, both Sarah Cote, the social services program director at the Jonnycake Center of Westerly, and Laurel Holmes, a social worker at the hospital, and the hospital’s director of Community Partnerships and Population Health, joined with Westerly’s burgeoning Village group and helped them to form a steering committee.

“The rest is history,” said Francis, who is a past president of the Village Common of Rhode Island. “They’ve all done such marvelous jobs.”

Meisner said initially she had concerns that there might be overlaps in a town like Westerly, with so many senior services already in place.

“There is already such a great sense of community here already and so many great organizations,” she said, “so I was a little skeptical.”

After meeting with Cote and Holmes, local civic and business leaders, clergy and representatives from the Westerly Senior Center, and after conversations with local pharmacists, physicians and assisted living professionals, she quickly learned there is a great and growing need for support services.

Doug and Stevie Champion of Westerly are both members of the Westerly Village Steering Committee and both serve as “membership ambassadors” for the village.

“We could be the poster children for the Westerly Village,” said Doug with a smile. “We may be the oldest members.”

He is 85 and Stevie is 81, he said.

“We moved here in 2000 and built a home which we expected to stay in,” explained Doug. “As the years progressed and we grew older, we downsized and sold our house.

“If the Westerly Village had been in existence, we would not have sold our home,” he said.

Now the Champions are putting their energy into building a strong membership base for the village, and are eager to make home visits to people interested in becoming part of the Westerly Village family.

“It’s a village,” said Stevie. “And it takes a village.”

For more information about Westerly Village, membership, services, and the launch party scheduled for July 25 from 3 to 5 p.m. at the Champy Clubhouse at Winnapaug Cottages, email West-erly@villagecommonri.org or call 401-441-5240.

nbfusaro@thewesterlysun.com ©2021 THE WESTERLY SUN