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# Networks are key for graying Granite Staters

Joanne Schultz gets by with a little help from her friends.

Volunteers drive her to appointments and pick up groceries and items from the hardware store for her. On summer weekends, they take her to the local farmers market, where she sells her handmade bags to steam vegetables, to supplement her Social Security income.

Schultz, an 84-year-old retired occupational therapist, is a member of the Village Network in Nashua, one of a growing number of nonprofit membership organizations helping seniors stay in their homes.

"I don't see very well, I don't walk very well, and I don't know what I would do without the Village Network," Schultz said.

"They're wonderful people," she said. "They're like family."

New Hampshire has the fourth oldest population in the nation. And with baby boomers fast becoming senior citizens, the trend is going in only one direction: up.

That's why communities need to start planning now to provide the services seniors will need to live safely and well, say the organizers behind the Tri-State Summit on Aging being held Friday in Concord.



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Service provider Suzanne Koperniak stands behind Nashua resident Joanne Schultz at her apartment on Friday. (DAVID LANE/UNION LEADER)



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Nashua resident Joanne Schultz, left, gets help from service provider Suzanne Koperniak at her apartment on Friday. (DAVID LANE/UNION LEADER)



Nearly 400 planners, community leaders and service providers from Maine, Vermont and New Hampshire are expected to attend.

Jess Maurer, executive director of the Maine Association of Area Agencies on Aging, is project leader for the tri-state collaborative on aging that organized the summit. She said it's not about creating new government programs.

"A lot of it is hearkening back to this idea of figuring out how to be better connected," she said. "And we understand as neighbors how to make that happen. It's pretty simple."

### The 'village' model

For decades, Maurer said, municipal planners have looked through the lens of providing for families and children. Planning for aging populations means thinking differently about housing, transportation, healthcare, even shopping, she said.

"They need to not be just about kids; they need to be about older adults. They need to not just be about childcare; they need to be about adult day care."

One of the summit presenters is Suzanne Koperniak, executive director of the Village Network in greater Nashua, where Schultz is a member. The "village" concept started in the Beacon Hill section of Boston.

"The idea is for members to get services to stay in their houses, but also to help each other out, so everybody can stay and be safe at home," Koperniak explained.

Members pay an annual fee (\$325 for individuals and \$525 for a household) that gives them access to volunteers who can help with household chores or rides to medical appointments.



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Service provider Suzanne Koperniak, left, visits Nashua resident Joanne Schultz at her apartment on Friday. (DAVID LANE/UNION LEADER)



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Nashua resident Joanne Schultz, left, meets Friday with Suzanne Koperniak, the executive director of the Village Network, at Schultz's apartment. The Village Network is a nonprofit membership organizations helping seniors stay in their homes. (DAVID LANE/UNION LEADER)



If a member needs more skilled help, such as plumbing or electrical services, the network has a list of vetted professionals who will do the work at a discount.

Russ Armstrong chairs the board of Monadnock at Home, another nonprofit based on the same "village" model. It was started in 2010 by a group of local seniors.

"What the founding members were looking for was a way to bring services to the community to allow seniors to live and thrive in their homes," he explained.

A native of Swanzey, Armstrong remembers "when somebody needed help, there was always a neighbor or a friend" to provide it. "What we've tried to do is bring that whole village concept that's been around for centuries ... back to life," he said.

Even simple tasks such as changing lightbulbs and stacking wood can become daunting as you age, Armstrong said. "And the problem is once these little things start to pile up, it can become a big thing."

In addition to relying on volunteers, the group partners with agencies in its 10-town catchment area, such as Meals on Wheels and home health care, to connect members with needed services.

And it's not just the help with chores that makes the village model work, Armstrong said. Members keep in touch with each other, a hedge against loneliness and isolation.

"A lot of times what we're finding is these connections get started and pretty soon you've got a walking partner," he said. "We're fostering that kind of interaction."

Armstrong and his wife joined the network at a relatively young age, in their late 60s. They don't need services yet, so they volunteer to help those who do.

Membership costs \$450 for an individual, and \$600 for a household. The way he sees it, he said, "I am investing in my own future."

## **Mindful development**

In some communities, local planners are taking the lead on such efforts.

Elizabeth Dragon is city manager in Franklin, which is looking at configuring the downtown to both better serve older residents and promote economic development. She sees the two as interconnected.

Adding benches downtown, renovating mill buildings into affordable housing, changing city ordinances to accommodate different types of housing, and coordinating volunteers across city services are among the projects the city is tackling, Dragon said.

She believes that planning for an aging population will also end up attracting the younger

workforce everyone says is necessary to keep the state vibrant.

"We find that millennials need very similar things as the elderly population," Dragon said, such as public transportation, downtown housing, walking trails and places to congregate.

In her vision, "When you build a good, healthy, vibrant community, it's not only good for the ... aging population, it's good for the young as well. And you can do it in a way that promotes economic development, so you create a win-win for everyone."

Tracy Tarr is an administrator in the state health department's Bureau of Elderly and Adult Services. She's on the planning committee for Friday's summit.

New Hampshire, Vermont and Maine share common demographics, Tarr said. While each has some larger population centers, she said, "We have many of the same issues around our rural areas and reaching and serving people who are really remotely located."

A successful community is one in which older individuals have the support they need to live in comfort and safety, she said. "It's basically what everybody wants: to be able to ... live at home and take care of themselves, and if they need and want help, to be able to access that help when it's needed."

Stephen Norton, executive director of New Hampshire Center for Public Policy Studies, is the keynote speaker Friday. He said the three northern New England states are about to be "transformed into a very different world, absent significant in-migration of young people."

"It's one where we spend an awful lot more on health care, we spend a lot less on cars, we spend a lot less on housing," he said. And at the same time, "Our workforce fundamentally changes."

New Hampshire's working-age population is projected to shrink by nearly 10 percent in the next 15 years, Norton said. And that, he said, "is going to create a caregiver crunch for all of those folks who want to have services, health care and otherwise."

Meanwhile, baby boomers who once moved to the suburbs to raise their children may choose to move to smaller cities to be near health-care and transportation amenities, he said.

All this is why Norton urges communities to start planning for change now.

Maurer said the New Hampshire tradition of neighbor helping neighbor will become even more valuable as our population continues to age.

"What I hope comes out of the summit is a clearer and new vision for how we want to age together in northern New England," she said, "and a bunch of communities that are armed with more tools that will help in the work that they do."

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