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By Amber Healy

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New service and referral system hopes to provide elderly residents the option of staying in their homes.

A big house on a large lot may sound like a wonderful idea to a young couple just starting out, looking for a little piece of the country to call their own. But when that same couple reaches their golden years, maybe unable to drive or keep up with the yard work, it may seem their only option is to sell the house and move to a retirement community.

Thanks to people like Bill Cole, Fran McWhorter, Brant Baber, and David Simpson, moving out of the home and into a retirement community will not be the only option.

As the founding members of Clifton-Fairfax Station Transition in Place Services (TIPS), the group is hoping to establish a clearinghouse of information, assistance and resources for older residents of remote areas who would rather stay in the comfort of their own homes than move.

"This phenomenon is going on all across the country, and as the Baby Boom generation gets older, it's going to grow more," said Cole, who serves as secretary and treasurer for TIPS. "There's been a groundswell of change happening for older folks who to this point have believed once you get to a certain age, the only option is to give up your home and downsize."

Cole said the interest in service-based groups for senior citizens gained national attention after a conference in Boston last year and an article distributed in a recent AARP publication. Similar groups are popping up around the area, including two in Washington, D.C. and one in Mount Vernon.

The idea is simple: TIPS, which is slated to officially kick off in July, will match members with volunteers to help run errands, like going to the grocery store, getting to doctors appointments or simply some conversation.

Additionally, Cole said, members will be able to call a central phone number and receive referrals for contractors, like roofers, plumbers, landscaping companies and even home health care providers. Members would be able to ask for recommendations, and then TIPS volunteers would call the contractors and arrange for interviews.

The members would be responsible for selecting the contractor, but after services have been

Getting Help

Transition In Place Services (TIPS) will begin offering help to seniors in the Clifton and Fairfax Station areas this summer. For more information, to volunteer or get involved, send an email to Bill Cole at wwcole@cox.net, Fran McWhorter at fran-val@cox.net, or visit www.cfs-tips.org.



Photo by Amber Healy/The Connection

Fran McWhorter, Brant Baber and Bill Cole are members of the founding board of the Clifton-Fairfax Station Transition In Place Services (TIPS) organization, seeking to provide assistance for older citizens who want to stay in their homes instead of moving to retirement communities.



provided, TIPS volunteers would ask the member if the work was done to their satisfaction, to keep their records up-to-date.

"We've seen surveys that show most older people are more afraid of going to a nursing home than they are of dying," Cole said. "If we can help people stay in their homes longer, we want to do that."

He said one woman, a member of the Boston-area group, even asked her group to place a bet for her on the Kentucky Derby because she was coming home from the hospital and could not place the bet herself.

"We want to help the husband and wife who are homebound but still want to get out to the opera or go out to dinner," Cole said.

The annual membership fee would cover services like transportation and friendly visits, he said, while the members would pay for any contracted work as needed.

Living in the Fairfax Station and Clifton areas, where many people have large homes on large lots, the feeling of isolation may creep in once people are unable to drive, said McWhorter, president of TIPS.

Lack of transportation options are already a problem in some areas of Fairfax County, but especially for older people who need help getting to appointments or shopping.

"It'd be great to give people the option of calling someone to come and take them to their appointments," she said.

Baber, the TIPS director, said his own mother and father-in-law were recently unable to leave the house after a snowstorm, and he knows if they had the option of calling someone to drive them somewhere, anywhere, they would have taken it.

"They can still drive, but it wasn't safe for them to try and walk on the ice with their canes," he said.

Transportation may be the biggest need to fill, they agreed, but it is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of the services they hope TIPS will be able to provide.

The group will rely heavily on volunteers, Cole said, some of whom will be asked to provide company to those members who may not have family or friends to talk with on a daily basis.

The TIPS group is the first to come together in the western part of Fairfax County, but similar groups are popping up around the region.

Mary Carroll Potter, president of Mount Vernon At Home, said her group is hoping to start providing services next January, once a full-time, paid staff is in place.

"We don't want to replicate any service already being provided," she said. "There's an enormous amount of services available from Fairfax County already."

Mount Vernon at Home has been in the organizational stages for nearly a year, Potter said, and "interest is hopping."

"I'm very impressed by the number of people in their 40s and 50s who are interested in getting help for their parents," Potter said. "I'm also impressed by the number of professionals and service providers who want to get involved already."

David Smith, vice president of TIPS, said his interest stems from trying to find help for his own parents.

"My mother lived to be 100 and I remember trying to help keep her in her home as long as possible, because that's what she wanted to do," Smith said. "My wife and I have lived in Clifton since 1968 and we want to stay in our home, like a lot of people. We figure if we bring enough talented people together, there's no reason we can't."

Smith and Baber said many seniors would take advantage of help if they knew it was available

but if they didn't think they were asking a favor.

"Most elderly folks don't like to put anyone out, but if they're paying for the service, I don't think they'd think twice," Smith said.

Fairfax County is starting to pay attention to the services required by its older citizens, and a conference has been scheduled for April 12 to bring together groups to develop a plan to meet those needs.

"We feel a conference like this will help groups build community and support for each other," said Grace Starbird, director of the Fairfax Area Agency on Aging in the county's Department of Family Services.

Organizations like TIPS and Mount Vernon at Home mimic an older era, when people knew their neighbors, Starbird said. "We have busy lives and there's a lot of things going on and we don't know who lives next to us anymore," she said. "Programs like this bring people together again."

Community-based groups help meet the needs of citizens in ways the county is unable, she said, because of the local focus on neighbors and individual communities.

Once TIPS and Mount Vernon at Home are up and running, Starbird said she hopes the groups will refer clients to the county for some services, while in turn the Agency on Aging will notify clients that community groups are also available for help.

"This is a major shift and a very positive one," she said. "There are lots of things we can do together, the county and the community, neighbor and neighbor."