

Older Americans; Village Values helps them grow old at home

By **opelikaobserver** - May 31, 2017



By Fred Woods
Editor

Today's older adults are living their lives with boldness, confidence and passion. Aging today is about eliminating outdated perceptions about the elderly and living the way that suits the individual older person the best. No longer are elderly people content to sit quietly in the corner and rock; no longer will they go quietly to assisted living or to a nursing home.

The first baby boomers turned 70 in January of this year. Every day, 10,000 Americans are turning 65. With an expected lifespan of 87, today's 65-year-old can expect to live an additional 20-plus years. According to Jo Ann Jenkins, CEO of AARP, the fastest growing age group in the U.S. is now "85 and up." Boomers and the rest of today's elderly have changed every phase of American life. They're engaged. They're on social media. They are traveling and they are volunteering at the food bank and the hospital. They are living their lives to the fullest. One thing the vast majority of them agree on: they want to stay in their own homes as long as possible as opposed to assisted living or a nursing home.

The Opelika-Auburn community is indeed fortunate to have an organization to help them do just this. VILLAGE FRIENDS VILLAGE VALUES (VFVV) provides older people the practical means to live safely and comfortably in their own homes for as long as possible. According to Martha Shepherd, board member and spokesperson for the group, "VFVV serves those seniors who are determined to keep control of their own lives and find creative ways to continue to live full and productive lives." Shepherd says the organization seeks to provide services and create social networks that meet the needs of today's senior citizens. This is the way VFVV's progressive concept works: subscribers (seniors, at least 60 years old) pay a modest fee. In exchange, they gain access to an army of vetted and trained volunteers who help with many of the things seniors can no longer do for themselves, helping subscribers to "age in place."

Subscribers call a service coordinator to arrange transportation assistance to doctor's appointments, hair appointments, grocery stores, library, adult education classes and the like. They may also request assistance with computer/television/internet problems, light home and yard maintenance and other services as requested. Volunteers may also provide friendly visits, act as "walking buddies" and make occasional friendly phone calls.

Scheduled activities bring both volunteers and subscribers together on a regular basis. Both are invited to monthly "Lunch Buddies" gatherings as well as a monthly "Super Night Out." Each quarter a "Lunch and Learn" program offering topics of interest for both volunteers and subscribers, presented by local experts is hosted at the Auburn Chamber of Commerce. Topics have included "Getting Your Affairs in Order," "planning for the Unexpected," "Investing Wisely," "Home Safety," "Elderly Law" and "Benefits of Fitness."

In addition to the desire for personal independence and better quality of life, the reasons for keeping seniors in their own homes as long as possible are increasingly economic. Shepherd points out that the average cost of putting someone in a nursing facility today is about \$86,000 annually. Not many people can afford that, forget about the desire to stay in one's own home with familiar surroundings.

The "Village Concept" relates to a community of people with similar goals and problems. VFVV, the very first "village" in the state of Alabama, was founded by a small group of local seniors in 2014. There are some 200 villages, each different, operating across the U.S. under the Village to Village Network umbrella.

Membership (by subscription) is open to residents of Opelika/Auburn who are age 60 and older. VFVV is a non-profit organization; the current \$240 (\$360 per couple) annual fee covers administrative costs.

Volunteers are vital to the organization and are constantly needed. They decide what service tasks they are willing to perform and how much time they are willing to spend.

VFVV is also exploring the concept of community partners, reaching out to local businesses and organizations that have a stake in the interests and needs of seniors. Several have already decided to support the organization, including the law firm of Davidson, Davidson and Umbach and the East Alabama Medical Center.

opelikaobserver