

Avenidas expands services to Los Altos

Written by Refugio Garcia - Special to the Town Crier

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Photo Courtesy Of Stan Zychlinsky Paul Gonella, chairman of the Aging in Place Committee, has worked to bring Avenidas Village services to Los Altos.

It takes a village to meet the needs of local seniors, and the Palo Alto-based Avenidas has expanded its Avenidas Village services to include older adults living in Los Altos and Los Altos Hills.

It's difficult to imagine spending your golden years alone and isolated without anyone to call when a little extra help could mean the world. But that's the reality for many seniors. The goal of Avenidas Village is to help seniors stay in their homes as they age, while maintaining their independence, mobility, security and sense of connection.

"This is a program that's able to assist many older adults with a whole lot of safety and support issues, and throughout this program we're able to meet all of those," said Vickie Epstein, Avenidas program director.

Los Altos launch

The Los Altos expansion of Avenidas Village officially launched March 1. Avenidas, which operates the senior center in Palo Alto and the

Rose Kleiner Senior Day Health Center in Mountain View, serves more than 6,500 seniors on the Peninsula, helping them stay connected in their communities.

"We want to help people who really feel alone, who feel disconnected and isolated, and think that they don't have people to call on," said Kari Martell, director of marketing and communications for Avenidas. "A lot of folks don't want to bother someone else, but with Avenidas Village, they have someone they can turn to now for help."

Los Altos Legacies, which works in conjunction with the Los Altos Senior Center and the Aging in Place Committee, a subcommittee of the Los Altos Community Foundation, collaborated with Avenidas to expand support for local seniors.

Paul Gonella, chairman of the Aging in Place Committee for the past three years, said the committee had been searching for ways to enhance senior services in the Los Altos area.

"When people retire, they like the town they live in – they don't want to move and they don't want to go to a home," Gonella said. "As you get older, you need more help."

Gonella and his wife, Ellen, are charter members of the Los Altos Avenidas Village expansion. Seniors join Avenidas Village for an annual fee of \$825 per person, \$1,050 per couple. Membership entitles them to advice, assistance, an optional daily telephone check-in call, transportation to and from medical appointments, a wide range of services and social activities, and volunteer opportunities – all via a single phone number.

"(Our members) are people who would like to stay in their homes and have services come to them," Epstein said.

Avenidas Village maintains a catalog of 140-plus vendors and service providers that have not only been vetted by the organization to ensure quality service, but also offer discounts to members.

"There's a team of folks on their side ready to help them, and do it with a smile," Martell said.

Leonard and Elizabeth Rush of Los Altos Hills joined Avenidas Village two years ago and have taken advantage of the prescreened service providers. The couple has called a handyman, a plumber and an electrician, finding the Avenidas Village-approved workers more reliable than those chosen blindly from the phonebook.

The virtual village model

Avenidas Village has worked with various community organizations in the Los Altos area to expand social networks and promote membership in and growth of the concept known as "virtual villages." The Beacon Hill Village Idea, a concept originated in Boston in 2001, was the result of a prudent, forward-looking plan to enable seniors to remain in their homes later in life.

Since then, the Beacon Hill project has created an online networking platform, vtvnetwork.clubexpress.com, that allows members from different senior villages to learn from each other and share ideas, without traveling. Beacon Hill sponsors conferences with other villages and hosts panel discussions on forming villages, recruiting members, fundraising and sharing ideas on programs and services, according to Rita Kostiuik, Village-to-Village coordinator.

Members of Los Altos Legacies and the Aging in Place Committee were in search of a model that would allow seniors greater access to services and social programs. They decided Avenidas Village fit the bill.

"There are probably 80 to 100 of these village-type ideas that aren't necessarily a geographical village, but a connection of people in the same general area who want some sort of insurance that they don't have to leave their houses (after retirement)," Gonella said. "We got together and decided that this is the thing that we want to promote in Los Altos."

As part of their research, representatives from Avenidas Village, Los Altos Legacies and the Los Altos Community Foundation convened a focus group to evaluate the experiences of five Los Altos residents and one Palo Alto resident already using Avenidas' services.

Helen Young of Palo Alto joined Avenidas Village in 2004 after her husband took a fall, leaving her overwhelmed trying to run the house on her own. Young testified that Avenidas Village members volunteered to assist her with shopping, calling the organization's services "priceless."

Los Altos resident Joan Brant joined Avenidas Village upon a friend's recommendation. Brant, who suffers from muscular degeneration and cannot see well enough to drive to Palo Alto, welcomes the arrival of Avenidas Village in Los Altos.

Martell said she envisions future growth of the village concept.

"We would like to see this roll out and continue, because it would be beneficial anywhere," she said.

As it moves inside Los Altos' borders, Avenidas Village is measuring success one member at a time, helping seniors avoid having to pull up roots and move from their communities and by "just letting people know that we're available to them," Martell said.

For more information on membership, call Dana Rhine at 298-5407 or visit www.avenidas.org/village.