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Finding A Way To Be Safe At Home

By By BRAD GROZNIK

It is hard to imagine sleeping on couches and in a different place every month, but for many Queens seniors it is a reality.

The waiting list for senior housing projects can take up to 10 years, sometimes too long for the elderly. It does not take much for seniors on fixed income to lose their homes and it can be impossible to get another.

One man has made it his mission to help seniors with these problems and is working on a program to secure housing and all the services of a nursing home at cost.

Robert Costanza began Be Safe at Home in 2002 and has recently joined forces with the Elmhurst-Jackson Heights Senior Center, 75-01 Bdwy., and the United Yokefellow Ministry to buy foreclosed homes, renovate them for seniors and offer them to the community. Already the senior center has a list of 400 people in need of homes.

"This is coming straight from the heart," Costanza said.

The program converts apartments and single-family homes into shared housing for seniors, providing a full range of services and programs such as personal emergency response, medication reminders, home maintenance, yardwork, grocery shopping and other domestic services at no additional costs to the residents.

Too good to be true? Not really; it is actually the second time Costanza has set up a program like this, he said.

Growing up in Corona in the 1950s, Costanza has watched his community change, and as he grows older he has noticed a lot of problems with senior care.

In the late 1980s Costanza, a recently retired mechanical engineer, started a similar program, which was so successful it grew out of his hands. He decided to start again with Be Safe at Home primarily because he wanted to help seniors stay in their homes but has since stretched out to buying foreclosed homes.

It costs the government \$65,000 a year for a senior to remain in a nursing home; with Be Safe at Home Costanza believes he can reduce that to \$4,000. Costanza remembers helping a woman live out her 90s in her beloved home with his first program.

"She was happier at home than she ever would have been in any nursing home," he said.



Robert Costanza, back, and Lucy Garcia, center, stand with seniors at the Elmhurst-Jackson Heights Senior Center.

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The program could not come sooner for seniors at the senior center, said Lucy Garcia, associate director for the center.

"It's just getting worse as the seniors get older," she said.

The center boasts a membership of more than 8,000 and feeds breakfast and lunch to 400 to 500 seniors a day.

Garcia has been working with Costanza since 2004 when they met pursuing Ph.D.s.

"We both had the wish to get housing for seniors," she said. "It's been about four years and we're not giving up."

Garcia said the center is able to do all of the case management at no cost to the seniors through grants it receives.

Much like an engineer would streamline a business, Costanza had paired his program with other senior care programs, creating an umbrella of care for the seniors in the program.

For example, Be Safe at Home works with physically and mentally disabled adults who can shop, change light bulbs and do yard work for the seniors. They also work closely with recent retiree and student volunteers.

This program also hopes to provide clients with pendants that when pressed call a command center. The button can be pressed in the case of an emergency or just to let the center know medication was taken.

Raymond Knab, a professional grant writer for 37 years, was so touched by Costanza's plan, he is writing the grants for securing housing for free.

"I'm a hard sell," he said. "And he sold me."

Knab said there is a lot of funding out there for program like Be Safe at Home and he hopes they can buy their first home early next year.

"I think we can knock out a house a month after that," he said. "There's going to be a lot of real estate to the benefit of this program. The foreclosures could turn out to be a godsend for these seniors."

For more information about these new programs e-mail

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