

Vintage senior center and Familylinks agree to merge

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By Joyce Gannon / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

After he became chief executive of Familylinks almost a decade ago, Fred Massey started seeking ways for the agency known for its family counseling, drug and alcohol treatment programs to expand into services for senior citizens.

Meanwhile, at the Vintage senior community center in East Liberty, Ann Truxell in 2010 had been named executive director and immediately was charged by her board of directors with shoring up the nonprofit's finances and programs so that they would be on a sustainable path going forward.

So when Familylinks in 2012 won a contract from Allegheny County to provide support to seniors so they could continue to live independently in their homes, the agency "got on my radar screen," said Ms. Truxell.

She called Mr. Massey and began a series of conversations that culminated in the organizations agreeing to merge in a deal expected to take effect next July.

The nonprofits, which plan to announce the agreement today, are characterizing it as an affiliation because programs and staff will not be affected.

Vintage Inc., with an annual budget of about \$1 million, will continue to operate its senior center on North Highland Avenue. It will become a subsidiary of the much larger Familylinks, which has an annual budget of \$19 million and is based in Banksville.

The boards of each organization approved the affiliation last week. The arrangement requires final approval by the Pennsylvania Attorney General's office.

For Vintage, which employs 11, the deal provides financial stability. It will allow the organization to expand programming that ranges from art classes and personal exercise training, to theater and restaurant excursions for approximately 125 seniors a day, said Ms. Truxell.

“We are small and neighborhood based, and that model is really changing,” she said. “Small nonprofits don’t have enough scale to spread their infrastructure.”

As a subsidiary of Familylinks, Vintage expects to save about \$20,000 annually in payroll costs, said Ms. Truxell. It will also trim expenses by tapping into human resources, development and information technology functions in place at Familylinks.

“We’re not big enough to have our own IT services,” she said. “So we’ll have immediate economies of expenses that [Familylinks] can absorb. The Vintage staff can focus their talents on programs instead of payroll, taxes and back-office stuff.”

For Familylinks, which has 340 employees and provides behavioral health counseling and treatment at 15 locations throughout the Pittsburgh region, Vintage will essentially become its senior services division, said Mr. Massey.

Under the contract with Allegheny County, Familylinks helps to assess and manage at-home services for seniors, including home-delivered meals, personal care needs and caregiver supports.

As part of the new affiliation, Familylinks plans to renovate a 160-year-old mansion that Vintage owns and which sits on property adjacent to the senior center. The rehab project will cost about \$2 million and the facility will be used primarily for offices, said Mr. Massey.

The mansion “was a financial drain on us to insure and maintain,” said Ms. Truxell. “So what I thought was a liability has turned into an asset.”

Vintage, founded in 1973, occupies a former Giant Eagle store that it bought and renovated in 1996. Its members, most of whom pay \$25 per year in dues, are mainly from the East End communities of East Liberty and Homewood and the borough of Wilkinsburg.

Besides its wide array of activities, the center offers breakfast and lunch, as well as health care counseling through Stanford University’s Chronic Disease Self-Management Program. It also has a full-time information specialist on staff to assist seniors with issues such as transportation, taxes and medical forms.

Ms. Truxell said the organization has flipped the model of the traditional senior center from lunch-centered to activity-centered. “We are being more forward thinking about what people want,” she said. “We have a hot lunch which I am happy to do, but people are much more interested now in activities like yoga and going to the Benedum Center or restaurants.”

Mildred Morrison, administrator of the Allegheny County Area Agency on Aging and a former executive

director of Vintage, said the Familylinks-Vintage affiliation appeared to be very good planning by the two organizations.

“One of the things we’re concerned about is smart management by nonprofits,” she said. “Vintage looked forward and knew it was going to have some operating challenges and chose to address them and to find a good partner.”

Peggy Morrison Outon, executive director of the Bayer Center for Nonprofit Management, said nonprofit combinations that focus on improving programs and services have a good chance of succeeding.

“Some have been financial or leadership solutions, and they’re not as much about the programs and what they really know. If it’s really about the services and program and what they care about and what they know, it may work. I’d like to see that drive mergers.”