

No place like home

At age 83, Frances Spak works full-time for a program that helps seniors age in place

By **MERRY MACKINNON**
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When an elderly man in North Portland needed his gutters repaired but had little money to pay for it, he called Frances Spak. When a North Portland senior wanted her refrigerator moved, she also

consulted Spak. And when a retiree asked where to get affordable foot care, Spak knew just where to send him.

"What I am basically is a connector," says Spak, program coordinator of Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORC).

A naturally occurring retirement community could refer to a street of single-family homes where residents raised families and then aged together in place or to an apartment building inhabited by long-time tenants. It's a nationwide program seeking to counter the isolation that often reduces the quality of life for Americans as they age.

According to an AARP study



Photo by Merry MacKinnon

Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORC) Program Coordinator Frances Spak (right) enrolls seniors in NORC at a North Portland neighborhood clinic as a senior gets affordable elder foot care from Kathy Wallace, an independent foot care nurse. Spak also visits other places in the area in order to recruit seniors living in North Portland into NORC, a program dedicated to helping seniors age in place.

(www.seniorresource.com), more than 80 percent of seniors would like to stay put in their homes for the rest of their lives because their homes offer comfort, convenience, familiarity, security, family and independence.

The local NORC provides links to free or low-cost services to help those 60 and older who live in certain North Portland neighborhoods stay comfortably in their homes. It's administered by the non-sectarian, nonprofit Jewish Family and Child Services, which hired Spak last August after obtaining a federal grant from the Department of Health and Human Services' Administration On Aging.

Spak often advises seniors who need assistance with non-medical issues on services to help seniors stay in their homes. Those could include home repairs, housekeeping, shopping, meal preparation and transportation.

At 83, Spak knows firsthand about aging in place. Until recently, when her son and his family moved in, Spak had lived alone in the same large, early-20th-century house for years. She has worked since she was 17 and in the beginning of her career administered a Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program, when WIC was just getting started. After retiring, she ended up back in the nonprofit world as a volunteer and occasional part-time employee. Now she's at it again, only in this case it's a full-time job.

LEARN MORE ABOUT NORC

For more information about NORC, call Program Coordinator Frances Spak at 503-226-7079, ext 111.

"Working at 83 is not that different from when I worked in my 70s or 60s," Spak says. "I don't think about it."

Currently, Spak is still doing outreach in her target area of selected North Portland neighborhoods. So far, she has recruited about 40 NORC participants who have expressed a variety of needs, but she hopes to keep expanding the program by enrolling more seniors.

"Participants have no obligation," Spak says. "There is no fee. They just let me know what services they need."

Since nurturing friendships plays an important role in building NORC communities, Spak also acts as a social and recreational director, organizing activities such as movies and yoga classes.

On one occasion, Spak arranged a tea party, serving tea and her own homemade cookies in the community room of a North Portland apartment building where many of the tenants didn't even know their next-door neighbors. About 20 residents showed up.

"Another goal of the program is to get seniors to know each other and to look out for each other," Spak says.