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Area programs aim to develop seniors' tech interests into enhanced skills

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When it comes to older adults and technology, there's a common misconception that seniors not only don't know what they're doing, but also don't want to know.

But many older adults, including those in Northwest, are debunking those myths. From technology classes to drop-in sessions to talks, seniors of all skill levels in the District are getting involved in everything from learning computer fundamentals and setting up online bill paying to getting advanced tips on cyber security from former National Security Agency executives.

Like people of any age, older adults are using technology to stay connected, and the rates are increasing. A recent study from the Pew Research Center found that 59 percent of people ages 65 or older use the Internet, up from 14 percent in 2000.

At the Dupont Circle Village, one of many community networks across the country that help residents age in place, "Tech Tuesdays" have become a popular monthly gathering. Members and their guests meet to discuss the latest developments in electronic devices and online applications. The village launched the group after surveying members and seeing a strong interest in technology.

"There really isn't as much fear as there is curiosity," said Kathy Cardille, activities coordinator at the village. "A lot of people

are very interested in technology and they know they don't know it all, but that's the lure of Tech Tuesdays — hearing about software that does things you might like to do or that you hadn't thought you would be able to do."

The group started as a forum for members to ask each other questions and share likes and dislikes of various devices or software and "to let people talk about their concerns, questions and thrills — what they found that's working effectively," Cardille added.

Discussion topics have ranged from exploring the newest gadgets to analyzing different phone-cable-Internet packages for the best deals to learning how to print a photo book. A recent talk on computer and Internet security was led by a member who is a former NSA executive with 25 years' experience in coding and encryption.

Tech Tuesdays also inspired members to start a Google group so they can continue the conversations online. In addition, the village has organized group classes at the Apple Store in Georgetown, and village volunteers provide one-on-one help to members who need assistance setting up a new computer, connecting a printer or programming a DVR, for example.

"The thing about the village is that it's a connectedness, not just socially but educationally, prompted by the needs and demands of members, and technology has always been on the forefront," Cardille said. "It's great to have volunteers help an individual, but it's also great to have the

collective thinking of the village — what one doesn't know, another person does, and we pull each other along."

At the Cleveland and Woodley Park Village, requests for help with technology are second only to those for transportation to doctor's appointments or the grocery store, said executive director Mark Ohnmacht.

As in Dupont, village volunteers provide one-on-one help to members. Ohnmacht says he gets about two to three requests per

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— Kathy Cardille

week for technology help, ranging from assistance setting up email to online bill paying. "A recurring theme from members is that they received an iPad or Kindle as a gift from family members and they want to learn how to use it," Ohnmacht said.

The village also recently hosted a tech-tutor fair at the Cleveland Park Library, where local seniors could stop by and get one-on-one help with any mobile devices they brought in or ask questions about products they were thinking about purchasing, like smartphones, tablets or laptops. About 20 people attended the drop-in session, which was a pilot program for the village.

"It was an opportunity for people to get free on-site consulting," Ohnmacht said. "One of our best volunteers was also our

youngest: a student from Edmund Burke high school just down the street. He was a big hit."

Deeming that event a success, the village now hopes to offer tech fairs quarterly, Ohnmacht said, though a date for the next one hasn't been set.

In Georgetown, the local aging-in-place village hosts a biweekly "Portable Electronics Support Group" and also offers periodic technology classes. The most recent class provided an overview of how to use Craigslist, aimed at members who are looking to downsize or sell items they no longer need. One previous class, called "Travelling Through Cyber Space," gave members tips on how to research the best prices and book travel and accommodations online; another focused on cybersecurity and protecting one's identity online.

A certain synergy happens in the biweekly classes, said Lynn Golub-Rofrano, the Georgetown Village's executive director. Members help one another with their mobile devices, and if no one knows an answer, they go online together to find one, she said. During one recent gathering, members were helping one woman download a YouTube video and in the process found a video interview with author Claire Tomalin, which coincidentally was pertinent to the village's upcoming book club meeting.

Golub-Rofrano said the technology knowledge works to "prevent isolation and keep our members engaged," so they can

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keep up with the technology their children and grandchildren are using. "Being on Facebook or using FaceTime, they can watch their grandchildren who might live across the country grow up."

She said sometimes members need more patience and confidence when learning new technology skills.

"If something doesn't go right the first time, or if they type in a password and it doesn't go through, they think, 'I can't do this,'" Golub-Rofrano said. "What I find is that they are quick to doubt their own abilities, they don't trust themselves, but I encourage them to try again, and they become more used to it."

Meanwhile, the Palisades Village offers a tech camp at the neighboring Georgetown Day School, where volunteers help members with various technologies including computers, mobile electronics and television services, said executive director

Andrea Saccoccia.

Like other local villages, volunteers also visit members' homes for one-on-one help on tasks like setting up email. For cases that require more specialized assistance, the village maintains a referral list for members.

The Northwest Neighbors Village is also on top of the issue for its members. An IT expert will discuss cybersecurity as part of a panel discussion next Tuesday co-sponsored by the Chevy Chase Citizens Association. Speakers at "Be Smart — Don't Be Scammed at Home or Online" will discuss "the latest fraudulent schemes coming to our homes and affecting personal safety," according to a description in the village's newsletter. The event, open to the public, will take place March 15 at 7:30 p.m. at the Chevy Chase Community Center, 5601 Connecticut Ave. NW.

The D.C. Public Library also provides technology services that can be beneficial for older adults. The central Martin Luther

King Jr. facility, for example, provides more than 20 free computer classes a month, open to the public. Although they're not specifically geared toward older adults, training coordinator Desiré Grogan said all age groups are welcome.

A "PC Basics" class for beginner and intermediate students is popular starting point for older adults, said Grogan. She finds that many of the seniors who attend the library classes want to stay in the loop with the rapidly changing technology.

Like the technology itself, ideas for training seniors are always evolving, said Dupont Circle Village executive director Eva Lucero. On the horizon are Uber-style apps geared toward older adults that would allow them to schedule home health aide visits and other medical care. That platform is now being tested in San Francisco.

"It's one way that health and aging and technology are coming together, making services accessible and allowing people to age in place," Lucero said.