

# Neighborhood villages look at new models

By Barbara Ruben

The Washington area has one of the most robust “village movements” in the country. There are currently 36 villages in the region, with another 12 under development.

Each one is a neighborhood or other network that enables older residents or members to age in place with the assistance of volunteers or vetted service professionals that help with household chores and transportation. Most villages also offer social and educational activities as well.

But that doesn’t mean the concept is well known among all seniors. Last year, Sylvia Saunders started organizing members of her Senior Fit exercise class, at the East County Community Center in Silver Spring, Md., so they could help each other with tasks and find rides to doctor appointments and other places as they needed them.

Then one day she saw a brochure about villages, which she was unfamiliar with.

It “blew my mind,” she said. “That was exactly what we were doing — establishing a village. What appealed to me was how on track I was for something I knew nothing about,” said Saunders, who is now the director of the nascent East County Village, which so far is developing a referral list of professional services providers. She is also working on a plan to recruit vol-

unteers from a youth group that uses the community center.

## Group-based “villages”

While most of the villages in the Washington area are based in particular neighborhoods, East County is part of a new trend that brings together people from organizations with which they are affiliated, such as community centers and faith-based groups, said Pazit Aviv, village coordinator for Montgomery County’s Aging and Disability Services.

“Demographically speaking, when you look at the village movement, the majority of people who are associated with it are white, upper middle class people in affluent communities. We are now looking at ways to broaden participation,” Aviv said.

But she said that’s a little tricky because, “You can’t come in as a government and start building villages for people, because they’re for people, by people.”

So Aviv advises groups on how they might find resources and create an infrastructure for their own “village.” In addition to the East County Village, she is working with the Muslim Community Center in Silver Spring to think about ways a village model might be created for its members.

## Subsidizing memberships

Another way in which villages are

changing: Some established villages are working to bring in more low-income members who may have not been able to participate because they could not afford the annual membership fee many villages charge to cover oversight and activities.

For example, Dupont Circle Village, in Washington, D.C., charges \$500 a year for individuals; \$700 for households. The village includes the Adams Morgan area, and this year it plans to offer subsidized memberships to 10 residents of Jubilee Housing and Sarah’s Circle — organizations that provide housing for low-income seniors in Adams Morgan.

In 2015, the village hired its first full-time executive director, Eva Lucero. The village has more than 170 members, spanning from 50 years of age to over 90, and relies on the help of 60 volunteers.

“A component I love about the village is the willingness of the volunteers. Everybody volunteers, and that’s the whole concept of the village movement,” said Lucero. “It saves both residents and the government an enormous amount of money if people can remain in their own homes” with the help of neighbors.

In addition to welcoming low-income members this year, Lucero would like to hire a social worker who can help with plans when members are discharged from the hospital, or when they become frail, so

that they can remain a part of the village as long as possible.

“All villages are going this way, as our membership gets older and possibly a little sicker. We have less than 10 members in need of constant checking in on, but it’s definitely going to grow,” she said.

Brian Footer, director of policy, planning and evaluation for the D.C. Office on Aging, also has concerns about the aging of village members and the more complex needs they may have as they get older.

“There needs to be a conversation about what a village can do. This is extremely difficult for those that are volunteer-based and don’t have the resources for case management,” he said.

While the District has hosted workshops to help its nine existing villages (and four under development) learn more about creating effective village structures and volunteer systems, Footer acknowledged the next steps will include tackling the relationships among villages, the government and the private sector as village members get older.

Footer is working with the Community Preservation and Development Corporation — a real estate developer for affordable and mixed-income housing — to explore ways their buildings in the Edge-

See **VILLAGES**, page B-11

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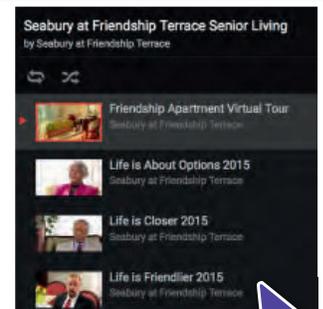
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## Villages

From page B-10

wood neighborhood of Northeast Washington can become villages.

The District is also looking at how faith-based communities can learn more about villages and how the village concept might be adapted to a congregation rather than a neighborhood.

### Small, less structured villages

In Northern Virginia, the trend is also moving toward less structured villages, according to Patricia Rohrer, who works with villages as the long-term care program development coordinator for the Fairfax County Health Department.

“What we’re noticing is there’s more of a movement toward [villages] that might be more within a small neighborhood and volunteer based, where neighbors are helping neighbors. They don’t have a big structure like the paid models,” she said.

“In particular, we’re noticing here that homeowners’ associations, civic associations — groups such as these that already exist and have a structure set up — are interested in and, in many cases, adding a kind of village or neighbor-helping-neighbor component to their organization.”

In addition to these ad-hoc villages, Rohrer is also seeing greater collaboration between villages. One issue that unites many villages is transportation and finding enough volunteers to provide rides.

Last year, Rohrer created NV Rides — a free computer program to more efficiently match those needing rides with volunteers to provide them, even if they live in different villages.

And as elsewhere in the region, there has been a greater emphasis on inclusiveness. Mt. Vernon at Home, in Alexandria, Va., recently received an endowment to help lower-income residents with the cost of membership (which is now \$700 for individuals and \$950 for couples), Rohrer said.

“It’s a challenge to get funding, a challenge to really serve the whole community by having enough resources to subsidize them,” she added.

Despite some growing pains and the challenges of creating villages in non-traditional ways, the Washington area is ripe for an evolving model of ways neighborhoods and organizations can band together to facilitate ways aging in place by older adults, said Montgomery County’s Aviv.

“That’s because of the nature of the people who choose to live in D.C. — the people who worked for the federal government, who retired from nonprofits that have headquarters here, think tanks, academia, the business community,” she said. “We’re talking about a powerhouse of skills, of knowledge and experience in management and leadership.

“So when those people retire, they bring all that treasure. I think we’re very blessed and fortunate to have the manpower to be the fuel behind the village movement.”

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