

Who will shovel mom's walk? 'Virtual villages' help seniors stay independent: Living On



Volunteer Andy Snouffer helped Village Connection member Meg Teaford open her frozen garage door in January 2018 at her home in German Village. (Courtesy Kristen Schweitzer, Village Connections)



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1



It was the middle of January, 1:30 in the morning, and the Teaford's garage door was frozen shut. Meg and her husband, Hamilton, had just returned from the airport after a trip out of town, and it was far too late to call anyone.

They parked their car outside and lugged their bags through the snow into their house in the German Village neighborhood of Columbus.

The next morning, Meg, 72, and Hamilton, 77, faced a long, frustrating day of finding a repair service, waiting for someone to show up, and possibly paying too much for what was probably a minor repair.

Instead, Meg called **Village Connections**, a non-profit that serves German Village and five contiguous neighborhoods. It is part of a national network of about 230 virtual villages dedicated to helping people stay in their homes and communities as they age. Villages -- one of which has just started up in the Cleveland area, while two are in the works -- provide members access to volunteer and other services, and social opportunities.

Researchers call it aging-in-place, and it is what most older Americans want, according to a **2014 AARP survey**.

The survey found that 88 percent of people over the age of 65 surveyed agreed with the statement: "What I'd really like to do is stay in my current residence for as long as possible." And 83 percent of those between the ages of 60 and 64 agreed.

The village model is simple, and may sound familiar to anyone who grew up in a neighborhood where residents knew one another well, socialized and were always willing to help their neighbors when needed.

Villages formalize those ideas by recruiting a pool of neighborhood volunteers, and then connecting them with older village members who need help. That help can be anything from a ride to the doctor or the grocery store; minor home repairs; mowing a lawn; shoveling snow, or helping out with computers or other tech devices.

"They do the things your children would do for you if they didn't live out of town," said Meg Teaford, whose two adult children live, yes, out of town.

Within an hour, four volunteers had answered the call to help the Teafords that cold January morning. It turned out that the rubber strip at the bottom of the door had frozen to the concrete, so, with the couples' permission, volunteer Andy Snouffer cut the strip with gardening shears to free the door.

Meg Teaford happens to be an expert in aging issues, and an enthusiastic proponent of the village model. She's a professor emeritus in gerontology at Ohio State University, and has been active as a member requesting services, a volunteer offering services, and a board member of Village Connections since it started in 2013. It is the oldest of the three active villages in the Columbus area, which has a fourth village in development. Cincinnati has one village; Athens has one, even Marysville has one.

Taking hold here

Cleveland's first village started up in January of this year, when **Village in the Heights**, spearheaded by Beachwood resident Paul Sobel, opened its virtual doors. Sobel, who became a licensed nursing home administrator in 2010 after many years in sales, has worked in nursing homes and as a consultant on aging issues.

He learned about villages several years ago when his mother-in-law, who is now 95 and lives alone in New Haven, Ct., needed help. She had given up driving when she was 92; and her son, who had lived nearby and was her main source of help, had died suddenly. But she was determined to stay in her home.

Like many older people, Sobel's mother-in-law resisted asking people outside her family for help. "It was that Greatest Generation attitude," he said. "She told me, 'I never took anything from anyone, how am I going to start now?' " After two years, Sobel finally got her signed up for **HomeHaven Villages** in New Haven, which had volunteers to drive her where she needed to go and help with all the things her son once did.

She loves it, Sobel said, so much that she wanted to be a volunteer as well as a member. So she does what the villages call "well calls," phoning other members to check in regularly and chat.



Sobel, who is 60, wanted to bring the community and services he found for his mother-in-law to Beachwood and part of its contiguous suburbs on the East Side of Cleveland, and began networking and spreading the word in 2014. Now, two months after its launch, Sobel said 10 members have joined.

Art Raby, the president of the Village in the Heights board, said he's noticed reluctance among his friends to join. "I'm not sure why," he said. "Some are people who are very close to needing these services, or who are only one blood clot or one fall away from needing them."

Challenges and opportunity

Part of the reluctance has to do with both pride and the stigma attached to getting old in America. Kristen Schweitzer, the paid executive director of Village Connections in Columbus, has seen it there, too. "People in their 60s and 70s don't want to think of themselves as old," she said. "I even had a 90-year-old tell me they weren't old enough for Village Connections."

Once people join, Schweitzer said, "They see it's easier for them to call me to ask for something than for them to ask a neighbor on their own."

Cost can be another issue. Villages charge membership fees of varying amounts to pay for staff, administrative fees and some social gatherings. At \$200 a year, Village in the Heights is a bargain compared to other villages in the country. Village Connections' annual membership fee is \$500 for an individual, \$750 for a couple, with a reduced rate of \$250 for social members who don't use the volunteer services but want to be part of the community.

Last year, Village Connections added 25 new members. A \$10,000 grant from the Columbus City Council allowed the group to charge new members half the annual fee for the first year.

"Our biggest service is transportation," she said, "and if you use that service regularly it's pretty easy to see how the membership would pay for itself." So far, she said, services like Uber and Lyft have not made much of a dent in their requests. In part, that's because many of their members don't use computers or smartphones and can't access the ride-sharing services.

Village volunteers also offer much more personal service. "Your Uber driver is not going to go into the doctors' office to wait for you," Schweitzer said. "They're not going to go in with you to listen to what the doctor is saying, and take notes on medications, the way our volunteers will if asked."

A growing movement

The Village idea was born in 2001 in Boston, when a group of residents got together to form the non-profit, independent **Beacon Hill Village** to keep the elders of their community at home. As word spread, more and more communities adopted the Beacon Hill model; today there are 230 active villages in 46 states, with more than 100 in development.

According to the national villages organization, **Village to Village Network**, two other villages in Cleveland are in development: Cleveland West Side Village, which didn't return several calls, and Old Brooklyn Community Village. The latter is being developed by **Senior Citizen Resources**, a traditional senior center in Old Brooklyn. Executive Director Liz Hernandez said the center is in the early stages of exploring funding possibilities.

Villages typically offer more than the volunteer services of driving and minor repairs and home maintenance. For major home repairs and ongoing maintenance, most Villages keep a list of vetted plumbers, electricians, contractors and so on, who often provide their services at a discount for members. Many villages also provide screening and referrals for home health care, cleaning and similar services.



But, as Schweitzer pointed out, the village concept is as much about bringing a community together as it is about services. "There are so many two-income households now, people just aren't at home as much as they used to be," she said. "You don't know your neighbors as well, especially as you age. I cannot tell you how many people will call me to ask for a ride, and I'll connect them with someone who lives on their street and they never knew them."

To foster that community bonding, villages also sponsor events. Columbus' Village Connections has a robust schedule that includes things like crochet, bridge and book clubs, as well as outings to museums and restaurants.

"Loneliness can be a problem as people age, and we know that social isolation leads to a decline in health very quickly," Schweitzer said. "So we make sure people are getting out as much as possible."

Village Connections has 80 members, 40 of them social members. Those members, Schweitzer said, don't need services yet but want to forge the ties that will help them when they are older, and will make their community stronger.

Villages, Schweitzer said, are for everyone in the community. "Everybody needs a little extra help. Aren't people always hitting up their friends for rides to the airport, or can you grab my mail or walk my dog? You do not have to be old or need a lot of help to see the value. We're about making sure everybody is getting to know their neighbors, and making the community a better place for all of us to live."

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Village in the Heights

- Serves parts of Beachwood, University Heights, Cleveland Heights and Shaker Heights, in the area east of Lee Road, west of I-271, north of Chagrin Boulevard and south of Mayfield Road.
- Membership fee is \$200 per year.
- Go to villageintheheights.org, call 216-512-1844 or e-mail info@villageintheheights.org

National village movement

- If you are interested in starting a village and want to know where to begin, go to the Village to Village Network at vtvnetwork.org, call 617-299-9638 or email vtv@vtvnetwork.org.

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