

THE SANTA MONICA STAR

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Westside Pacific Villages Are Pioneering Aging in Place

By Miceala Shocklee

Westside Pacific Villages (WPV), formerly Westchester Playa Villages, is reclaiming community for Los Angeles's senior citizens. The idea behind the non-profit is to harness the power of "neighbors helping neighbors" in order to assist the elderly in maintaining an active and independent life from within the familiarity and stability of their own homes and communities for as long as possible.

The 65-years-and-older population is growing. With adult children becoming increasingly migratory and traditional nursing homes or caregivers providing too high a degree of care than is actually needed by many senior citizens, another system was needed to fill the gaps.

Enter the village model. The movement is a grassroots effort fo-



Student volunteers visit a WPV member.

cusated around the "aging in place initiative." The first village sprung up 15 years ago in the Beacon Hill neighborhood of Boston, but there are now about 200 independently-run villages planned or in operation nationwide, with over 50 of them in California. Westside Pacific Villages is now serving Mar Vista, Venice,

Westchester, Playa del Rey, Marina del Rey, Playa Vista, Culver City, Ladera Heights, and adjacent areas.

WPV works through synergy, connecting senior citizens who need just a bit of assistance to get something done with pre-vetted volunteers who provide the helping hand to do it. For example, WPV volunteers climb ladders to change out dead light bulbs or stop by weekly to take trash bins out to the curb and back—or to just chat, or maybe go for a walk around the block with a client. WPV volunteers also provide transportation for clients to places like the grocery store, doctors appointments, and even the movies, or one of the wellness programs that WPV hosts around the community.

The mission of the village model is to keep the nation's senior citizens as healthy and active as possible, for as long as possible—and preliminary research is showing that it's working. According to a study¹ recently published by UC Berkeley's Dr. Carrie Graham, Dr. Andrew Scharlach, and Dr. Jennifer Wolf, three quarters of surveyed village members report that their ability to age in place well with respect to social engagement, service access, and overall wellbeing and independence, not just remained constant, but in fact, increased.

Carol Kitabayashi, executive director of Westside Pacific Villages, believes in the ability of the village model to not only support a community's senior citizens, but also to

enrich the lives of the volunteers helping them. The WPV team is a passionate and caring group. "If you ask them," she explained proudly, "they'll tell you that they get more out of volunteering than they give."

Carol herself started out as a volunteer, having left a for-profit job in human resources in order to apply her people-oriented problem-solving skills to the non-profit world of senior citizen assistance. She fell in love with the work and found her niche running WPV. "I was in just the right place at the right time," she shares.

As for the future of WPV and the village model at large, Carol hopes that one day, everyone will know about the movement, and every community will have a village. Like the village members, Carol wants to see the model continue to grow and flourish.

If you're interested in membership for yourself or a family member, or would like to become a volunteer, visit www.thewpv.org to learn how you can join WPV in recreating community. Or, attend a workshop on Saturday, March 19, from 11 a.m.-12:30 p.m. at Windward School, 11350 Palms Bl. at Sawtelle Bl., Room 800. Call 310-695-7030 for more details.

1. Graham, C. L., Scharlach, A. E., & Wolf, J. P. (2014). The impact of the "village" model on health, well being, service access, and social engagement of older adults. *Health Education & Behavior*, 41(1 suppl), 91S-97S.



WPV volunteers helped a member clean out his backyard.