

What's a village?

Helping older adults stay in their homes is what a village is all about.

Villages are “grassroots organizations promoting neighbor-to-neighbor support,” according to the Village to Village Network, a national coalition. These nonprofits, many of which are startups, help older adults age in place in their neighborhoods.

The idea began in Boston’s tony Beacon Hill neighborhood two decades ago. A group of neighbors didn’t want to move to retirement communities in the suburbs. Instead, they said, they wanted “to stay engaged in our own neighborhood in this vibrant city.” They formed a nonprofit, Beacon Hill Village, in 2002.

Today, more than 250 villages exist in American, with 100 more in the works, according to the Village to Village network. In our area, D.C. has 17 villages, Virginia has 16, and Maryland has 40, according to the Washington Area Villages Exchange.

There are many different kinds of villages, but most offer free rides (or did so before the pandemic, that is). Volunteers would regularly drive people to the doctor, church or grocery store.

They may also offer technological help, make friendly phone calls and bring older adults together with events. Some villages, like the one in Takoma Park, Maryland, even send volunteers to do home repairs or declutter houses.

Most village charge a small annual fee for their services - the cost is low because the groups are powered by volunteers.

Many village members donate several hours a week to their local group. At the Arlington Neighborhood Village, for instance, about one in four members are also volunteers.

In Washington D.C., the Georgetown Village’s volunteers are now delivering groceries to members.

The group “has totally pivoted” due to COVID, said its executive director, Lynn Golub-Rofrano, MSW. It has started offering online programs for free. The web-based programs fulfill some of Georgetown Village’s core goals to prevent social isolation, provide volunteer services, and offer education sessions.

By Margaret Foster, *Washington Beacon*, October 2020