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Join the Positive Aging Community,  
[page 4](#)

Housing Options + Moving & Downsizing,  
[page 65](#)

Aging in Place,  
[page 173](#)

Legal, Financial and Care Management Resources,  
[page 37](#)

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# Village People

By Christy Brudin

Imagine a place where neighbors help each other. Where friendships are forged. Where young and old work and play and thrive—together. This modern-day hamlet does exist: it's called a village.

In a world where neighbors are anonymous and friends are only friends online, **DC Villages** stand out. DC Villages are a network of thirteen individual villages throughout the District of Columbia that deliver services, resources, and opportunities to seniors and their communities.

## What's a Village?

Villages serve older adults who live in their own homes, whether that be a single family home, an apartment or condo, a family member's residence, or in a senior living community. Villages are NOT senior living communities. They are community-based service organizations that help older adults live independently in the place they call home.

Villages reduce senior isolation, improve health outcomes and foster community connections. As non-profit organizations, a mix of volunteers and staff operate most villages.

Each village is community-based with a hyper-local focus. Accordingly, every village is unique. Villages are many things to the people who call them home.

## Growing

The village movement is a nationwide effort. The villages in DC not only work together, they also operate as part of a national network—a network they are committed to expanding.

"I think part of the job now is really to inspire other neighborhoods to form their own villages in places that don't have them," said David Mackoff, the board

president for the **East Rock Creek Village**. "This is a good thing for seniors—and for all the people in a neighborhood. It is our job now to show other communities how it's done—to advise and encourage them." Any community with an active citizenry and interested population can start a village.

## Proactive

A former geriatric social worker and senior housing executive, Stephanie Chong finds her new role as the executive director of the **Northwest Neighbors Village** exhilarating. As a social worker, she typically met with clients after a crisis. They didn't want assistance from a medical professional they had never met before. Trust was an issue.

Working as part of a village is exactly the opposite. "We have the opportunity now to address a potential crisis before it happens because our volunteers are trained to recognize subtle changes and to address them or to help clients find resources," Stephanie explained. "We can also be proactive because people are more comfortable asking a neighbor for help. We are building community."

## Volunteer driven

Without volunteers, villages would not be possible. In fact, volunteers completely run some villages. Volunteers range from teenagers to young professionals to adults to seniors who both receive services and donate their time. Even villages with paid staff members, like **Palisades Village**, need volunteers to function, explained Executive Director Erica Blanton.

"Volunteers are the heart and soul of the village, and both the members and volunteers reap the

*Continued on page 4*

Opposite page (clockwise): Friends gather for lunch; Social events help neighbors stay connected; Grocery delivery was essential throughout the pandemic; Leaders from all the Villages gather; Village volunteers offer physical, social, and emotional support.



arthritis prevents him from gardening, he is happy to conduct lectures and art classes, while other members provide gardening assistance for him. Everyone gives, and everyone gets.

## Recommended

Recruiting new members is essential for the continuation and growth of villages. Many new members come to their local village based on the recommendation of a doctor, care manager or other trusted professional. “We work really hard to get the word out to the professionals in our community, so they can identify seniors who need help and refer them for membership,” said Executive Director of the **Dupont Circle Village** Eva Lucero.

Professionals are eager to recommend seniors to villages because they have a track record for keeping older adults active, engaged and living at home.

## Helpful

Villages are a simple concept with profound impacts. They are, in effect, bringing neighborly back. Lynn Golub-Refrano, the founding executive director of **Georgetown Village**, recalled an elderly member who requested a ride to a dry cleaner to have clothes altered after losing weight. The village didn’t provide the ride; instead, they provided a volunteer college student with a sewing machine who altered the clothes for free.

“I always tell my members, ‘Just ask!’ If we can help you, we will. If you need something that isn’t on our list of services, ask,” said Lynn.

## Connected

Modern-day neighborhoods are often anonymous. Villages are anything but. “Our members say they can’t walk down the street anymore without running into somebody they know,” said Executive Director of the **Foggy Bottom West End Village** Denise Snyder. “It is the gift of villages that they help create a sense of community, a true social network that supports every member of the village.” Feeling comfortable, safe and cared for in the community you call home is definitely a priceless gift.

## Peace of mind

Beyond services, members gain peace of mind that they will have access to help when they need it. Many members join a village before they need services and volunteer to help others.

According to Len Bechtel, executive director of the **Waterfront Village**, “Some members start as great volunteers.” He continued, “We have a member now who is an active volunteer but receives no services. She views her membership as a form of insurance. She may



Many villages offer activities that help older adults remain active.

## Village Services

- Transportation
- Grocery shopping
- Meal services or meal preparation assistance
- Help making doctor’s appointments
- Nutrition assistance
- Fitness classes
- Free social work services
- Small household repairs or maintenance tasks
- Cleaning assistance
- Friendly visiting
- Laundry service
- Trash service
- Gardening assistance
- Computer assistance and classes
- Social gatherings (both in person and virtual)
- Educational events (both in person and virtual)
- Support during a hospitalization or illness
- Help with pet care
- Cultural activities
- Outings
- Regular check-ins (telephone or in-person)
- Health and Wellness events (free blood pressure checks, vaccinations, eye exams, etc.)
- Advance planning assistance (long-term care insurance, advance directives, etc.)
- Help accessing city, state and federal resources for seniors
- Community building events
- Volunteer opportunities
- Advocacy for causes important to senior residents
- And more; just ask!

*\* Services may not be provided by all villages.*

## Members Speak

“One of the best things about villages for the members are the social activities. It helps with isolation tremendously!”

—MARY KLUTE,  
Volunteer and member,  
Palisades Village

“The thing I love most about our village is the friendships and connections that have formed. It is so heartwarming. I know those connections will be there for me when I need them.”

—SANDY RUBIN  
Member and board co-chair,  
Cleveland & Woodley Park Village

“Wow, what service! After my knee surgery, I had to go to lots of appointments, but I never had to order a cab or an Uber because village volunteers took me everywhere I needed to go.”

—ANN INGRAM,  
Member and volunteer,  
Northwest Neighbors Village

“We have so many members we have helped with computer classes. We have one member who is 105, and she learned to use the computer at village classes!”

—GULEFORD BOBO,  
Volunteer and member,  
Kingdom Care Senior Village

## Village People

*Continued from page 5*

not need help now, but she likes knowing that she has a village to count on if she ever does.”

### Supportive

“When there is an emergency, we tell our members to Call 9-1-1, then call the Village,” said Executive Director of the **Capitol Hill Village** Judy Berman. “We want our members to focus on their medical needs with their professional caregivers. We handle everything else. They don’t have to worry about pets, or cleaning or leaving the house unattended. We are the backup that takes the burden off people and makes emergencies less traumatic.”

In addition to helping with small household tasks or pet care in an emergency, villages can also help older adults locate resources to address their larger medical, legal and financial needs—providing referrals for everything from advance directives to care management.

### Intergenerational

Senior isolation is a real problem. Family members often live far apart. Older adults run the risk of becoming isolated if they stop driving or have a chronic illness or medical emergency requiring a long recovery. Villages promote interconnections by facilitating intergenerational living. Younger people, including children and teens, are encouraged to engage with their elders in social activities.

“We have quite a few young volunteers, and they love connecting with our seniors,” explained Kathy Pointer, director of **Kingdom Care Senior Village**. “Whether they are delivering groceries, providing support for events or activities, or just enjoying a friendly visit, our young volunteers are happy to support their seniors. They gain so much from the interactions too!”

### Powerful

“Villages are so much. They do so much,” said Executive Director Charles McCullough of the **Greater Brookland Intergenerational Village**. The power of villages is in the breadth of services and resources they offer to a wide range of participants. From members to volunteers to local businesses, everyone gains from participating in the village movement.

While the specific services provided by villages may vary, all villages respond to the evolving needs of their unique populations. “A village really is a community. It is us helping us—neighbors helping neighbors,” Charles concluded.