

# 'Villages' Help Neighbors Age At Home

by JENNIFER LUDDEN



Enlarge

Jennifer Ludden/NPR

Betty and Jack O'Connor want to stay in their Chevy Chase, Md., home as they age and are trying to create a [network of volunteers](#) in their neighborhood, called a "village," to help them with tasks they can no longer handle.

August 23, 2010

text size **A A A**

*Part one in a four-part series*

In Chevy Chase, Md., Betty and Jack O'Connor are part of a growing number of people banding together to help each other grow old at home.

Betty is 80, Jack, 85, and it's something of a triumph that they're still living independently in their suburban house, with its backyard garden and pool.

Jack suffered a brain injury in a fall five years ago. Since then, a hip replacement has left him frail, and an allergic reaction to the anesthesia in that operation stole even more of his memory.

"This is my miracle man," Betty says. "And Jack and I do not want to leave the house."

"Oh, no," Jack agrees. "I don't know what the alternatives are, but I can't think of a good one."

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## Links

Actually, Betty knows exactly what the alternatives are. She has visited friends in assisted living and nursing homes, and she says she finds such places depressing.

"We like to be around young people," she says. "There's so many walkers over there, and I feel sorry for them because they're in these long

The village movement dates to the 2001 founding of [Beacon Hill Village](#) in Boston. This year, [the Village to Village Network](#) launched to help other communities create their own senior support groups.

Other sites created to help arrange help for seniors who want to live independently at home:

[Home Instead](#) and [Senior Helpers](#)' services include companionship, conversation, meal planning and house cleaning as well as Alzheimer's and dementia care.

[Lotsa Helping Hands](#) allows visitors to create a volunteer community designed to help seniors with everyday tasks.

[Community Care](#) offers practical, nonmedical supportive services, such as driving to the doctor or preparing meals.

[Caring Companion Connections](#) offers daily help with tasks like errands and personal care, plus daily Web status reports for family members.

corridors."

So the O'Connors have a plan: If and when Jack can no longer climb the stairs, they'll convert their first-floor family room to a bedroom. But they'll still need help, so Betty has begun recruiting friends and neighbors to help create what's called a "village," an organized network of volunteers dedicated to doing what's needed for seniors to stay in their own homes. For an annual fee, these communities help seniors manage household tasks they can no longer handle and arrange transportation when they can no longer drive.

### Creating A Village

There are already 50 of these nonprofit groups around the country, with 100 more in the works — and it's a trend that's expected to gain steam as baby boomers hit their golden years. Village organizers say the key is training seniors to reach out and request help, something that doesn't come easily.

"We spend our lives from childhood being told, 'Be independent, do this for yourselves,'" says Gail Kohn, executive director of [Capitol Hill Village](#) in Washington, D.C. "Then we get to a certain point when we say, 'We want you to ask.' That's alien to all of us, and it feels like dependence."

### Explore The Series

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Aug. 23, 2010

Part 3: Wired Homes Keep Tabs On Aging Parents  
Aug. 24, 2010

In three years, Capitol Hill Village has signed up 350 members. The \$500 to \$800 annual fee pays for a small staff, which helps coordinate a long list of volunteers.

The village office is a borrowed row-house basement, where Julie Maggioncalda manned the 24-hour telephone help line one recent morning. She connected one member with a carpet cleaner, one of an array of vendors the village vets for reasonable rates and reliability. On another call, she lined up a volunteer to water someone's garden. Organizers stress that no need is too small.

A lot of villages are in better-off neighborhoods, but Capitol Hill and others use private grants or public money so they can offer a steeply discounted annual fee to those who need it.

And frequent callers may well get their money's worth.

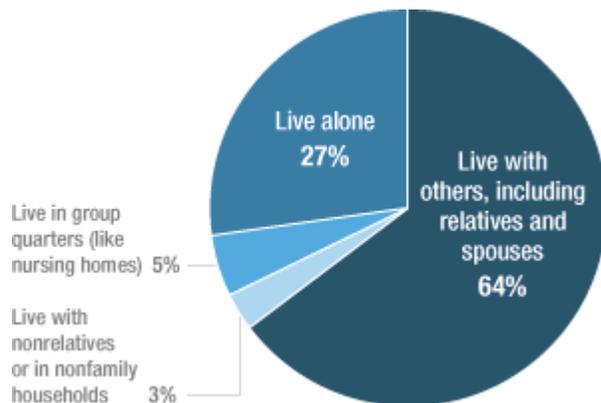
Kohn says tech help is a big need: " 'Fix my computer,' [or,] 'Program my watch,' or, 'Why is it that I can't download that?' "

### Where We Age

Only 5 percent of Americans ages 65 and older live in

Transportation is also popular. The village coordinates rides to doctors' appointments, the grocery store and the airport. It has sent

group quarters like nursing homes. In recent years, this share has been steadily declining (based on 2008 American Community Survey data). Numbers do not total 100 due to rounding



Source: AARP/U.S. Census Bureau

Credit: Alyson Hurt/NPR

volunteers to ride along in the ambulance when members have had to go to the emergency room. There are also regular social outings, plus activities geared to keep members in shape.

"We have a third of our volunteers who are 30 and younger," Kohn says, "and they very much like playing Wii with our members, which helps the members with balance."

The village even sponsors a monthly balance class in the basement of the local library. The aim is to help prevent a dangerous spill in the shower or a tumble down the stairs.

Exercise, tech help and car rides may sound like small stuff, but added together, such support can have a huge impact. Members say it can make the difference between feeling the need to move into

assisted living and having the confidence to stick it out on one's own for a few more months — or even years.

### A Support Group

On a leafy Washington side street, Patricia Witt, 75, slowly climbs out of a car in front of her white brick townhouse. She wears those boxy, black sunglasses that seniors like, and she's leaning on a walking cane. A village volunteer has just brought her home from yet another doctor's appointment and escorts her to the door.



Enlarge

Becky Lettenberger/NPR

Patricia Witt credits the Capitol Hill Village for helping her stay in her home. Volunteers drive her to doctors' appointments and help with household repairs.

Capitol Hill Village found a handyman to put up a railing. The village rides save her cab money. Mostly, though, knowing that she has a support group to call on means her children — who live in the Midwest — don't have to worry so much.

"I love my children, and they're very supportive of me," she says. "But you can't live together. It's very

"Well, thank you very much," she tells him as she fumbles for her keys. Witt has nearly lost sight in one eye and is recovering from surgery in the other. She has also had a heart valve replaced. She can't bear the thought of leaving her home but admits that she has begun to feel vulnerable.

"I'm so afraid I'm going to fall," she says. "So then, of course, I've got stairs here." They're steep and narrow. But in her desire for independence, Witt even rationalizes that.

"I could go up on my knees, actually. I can crawl upstairs," she says.

But her open front stoop had become a menace.

difficult."

For as long as possible, Witt hopes the village can help maintain her privacy and independence in the home she loves.

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Recent First



**Silvia Wilson (sillama)** wrote:

As an independent elder, I reacted negatively to the comment by "Fred Postal." I live alone, work part-time and volunteer at the local Lifelong Learning Center. I certainly don't want some nurse overseeing my "activities of daily living" (the PC term for bathing, going to the bathroom, and dressing or feeding myself). I applaud Betty and Jack O'Conner for staying in their home. How dare he question Betty's judgement after listening to her talk about the research she has done and the connections she is developing in her quest to build a 'village' of neighbors?

Wednesday, August 25, 2010 11:56:38 AM

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**Carol Leavenworth (Despr8caregiver)** wrote:

As caregiver for my aging parents i have experienced a numaber of different "senior storage" alternatives. There are some very nice senior living communities out there , but the big difference between them and the "village" intentional ommunity approach is twho decides what the needs of the participants might be. There's a sort of "Big Brother" feeling about even the nicest of the senior living communities--wouldn't it be fun to have a luau?? In the intentional communities, the ultimate boss is the service recipient. Staying at home, deciding what your needs are and working with your community to get them met. It's the most comfortable and sensible option I've seen so far. I writing about my experiences as a caregiver at [www.desperatecaregivers.com](http://www.desperatecaregivers.com)

Wednesday, August 25, 2010 9:28:09 AM

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**Deborah Cadman (Nanorc)** wrote:

It is an unfortunate assumption made by Ms. Ludden that seniors like "those boxy, black sunglasses". Actually, in trying to find affordable sunglasses so that my father, who suffered from aggressive wet macular degeneration, could be outdoors and tolerate any sunlight, we found that there were no other options. More stylish sunglasses did not provide enough occlusion of light and were usually quite expensive for my father's meager budget. Many elderly diabetic patients with retinopathy and patients with degenerative eye diseases need strong protection to achieve any comfort in strongly lighted areas. Some medications cause photosensitivity in the elderly that requires sun protection greater than can be found in the more stylish sunglass choices.

Our society tends many times to think of the elderly as being unchic. However, my father cared about his appearance and would have preferred eyewear that was more attractive - the choices just aren't there.

Tuesday, August 24, 2010 3:11:01 PM

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**Don Carrick (DonAtSHS)** wrote:

Great series. An important topic and one I'm sure we will be hearing much more about as the Boomer generation ages. I must say though, the digital solutions do kind of creep me out. As a young Boomer this stuff is looking all too real and I'm not sure I would really want anyone keeping digital tabs on me. That said, I know the companionship aspect is a very real issue for seniors. With decreased mobility and social contact, isolation and depression become very real problems. I would add one more service to your list of links and that is Seniors Helping Seniors. [www.seniorshelpingseniors.com](http://www.seniorshelpingseniors.com) What is unique about this service is that it is Seniors who provide the services. Seniors who can relate to those they are helping and who often develop close friendships. It helps the more capable Seniors with some income and a rewarding way to give back to their community and it provides Seniors who need help with welcome social contact in addition to the services.

Tuesday, August 24, 2010 2:31:36 PM

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**Arlene Muzyka (amuzyka)** wrote:

There is a wonderful new neighborhood being developed at Ecovillage Ithaca, named TREE. Its goals are accessibility, affordability, and aging in place. One of the great aspects of TREE is that it is a multi-generational neighborhood, and is part of the existing Ecovillage, which has been a model of sustainable community since the 1990s. My husband and I (we are in our early 60s) will be moving to Ecovillage once the TREE neighborhood is completed, in late 2011 or early 2012. Many of the dwellings will be built with a first floor bedroom and bathroom, and most will be wheelchair accessible. We are already planning how we will support each other as community members age. One of the best features is that the costs of living in TREE will be very affordable, partly because of the super-insulated construction of the homes.

Tuesday, August 24, 2010 1:41:20 PM

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**Kari Martell (Karigoog)** wrote:

Seniors should know that Villages aren't just on the East Coast--Avenidas Village in Palo Alto, California, was the first of its kind on the West Coast, launching in Oct. of 2007. For almost 3 years now, Avenidas Village members have enjoyed how this aging-in-community program has helped them maintain their independence while staying in the homes that they love, and keeping them mobile, active, safe and connected. 24/7 coverage was recently added, further increasing the value and giving seniors the safety net they need.

Tuesday, August 24, 2010 11:23:06 AM

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**Susan White (SusanfromWhidbey)** wrote:

Ah, but Cokie should come to Portland! As a 72 year old, working full time on Whidbey Island, WA, I too planned to stay in my home and continue at my desk until they carried me out on a gurney. So I can understand those who really want to stay put. Then the onset of a chronic, debilitating illness made me rethink. I certainly didn't want any of my three great kids to have to deal with my accelerating aging. I'd driven through Portland once, years ago; and it immediately impressed me as a rare city I'd find non-claustrophobic: maybe it's the lower buildings, wonderful greenery, and obvious commitment to maximizing enjoyment of the outdoors.

After just three months into retirement in a brand new city, I've never been so happy! At least consider the Continuing Care community option before you decide.

Tuesday, August 24, 2010 9:16:06 AM

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**Christine Sotmary (Sotmary)** wrote:

In Yorktown Heights, NY we are creating a High School Program called Kids Care2 that will link Caregivers to High School volunteers for tasks like shopping, weeding, doing laundry, cooking or anything else that makes our Caregivers lives easier. The Boy Scouts are helping us create a Venture Crew out of this project. Paula Costella is finding the Caregivers, along with the Teen Center helping to find volunteers. Cleo Reis created the program and we've been getting good publicity to get things rolling.

Tuesday, August 24, 2010 6:18:09 AM

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**red slider (redslider)** wrote:

definitely a 21st century idea - harnessing the resources and talent that lives in your own neighborhood, and is willing to pitch in for their own interests and those of their neighbors. Like to see the village idea extend beyond just seniors, but for now its a great place to start and a good testing ground for getting people out of their personal (me alone) shells. red slider, California Advocates for the 21st Century.

Tuesday, August 24, 2010 3:09:45 AM

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**Eric Engel (LAFlyer)** wrote:

Mar Vista and Santa Monica, California are in the midst of forming villages, to be called WISE Connections, as a project of WISE & Healthy Aging. Launch of the Mar Vista village is expected in Fall 2010. WISE & Healthy Aging, a nonprofit social services organization, enhances the independence, dignity and quality of life of older adults in Greater Los Angeles through leadership, advocacy and innovative services. For more information, go to [www.wiseandhealthyaging.org](http://www.wiseandhealthyaging.org)

Tuesday, August 24, 2010 2:31:43 AM

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