

Aging Americans stay home with aid of 'villages'  
BEN NUCKOLS Associated Press  
Posted on 11/12/2011  
Norwalk Hour

WASHINGTON -- Weaver Shepperson has been blind for nearly 50 years. He's lived alone since his wife died in 1999 and needs transportation several times a month to visit his doctors.

Yet he doesn't plan to move out of the rowhouse in Washington's historic Capitol Hill neighborhood where he's lived since 1955.

The 80-year-old is part of a burgeoning movement among senior citizens determined to stay in their homes as long as possible. With the help of nonprofit groups known as "villages," they're enjoying many of the perks that residents of retirement or assisted-living communities receive, at a fraction of the cost.

Shepperson pays \$530 annually for membership in Capitol Hill Village. It enables him to receive a ride to the doctor's office from the village's network of volunteers. The village also takes care of his grocery shopping. Without it, he says he might have had to move into assisted living.

"After the village became available, I stopped thinking about what my other alternatives would be," he said.

Capitol Hill Village is one of the oldest and most robust of the roughly 65 active villages nationwide. It's been around four years and has more than 350 members.

While the village movement is gaining momentum, it's an option unavailable to the vast majority of elderly Americans. There also are questions about the long-term viability of the organizations.

The desire of Americans to live at home instead of moving into retirement or assisted-living communities -- known as "aging in place" -- has always been strong. AARP surveys consistently . . . show that nearly 90 percent of people 65 and older want to stay in their homes as long as possible.

But what if you have to stop driving? Or can't change light bulbs, maintain the yard or get into the attic? For most people, there are few options beyond relying on relatives or neighbors. This was the dilemma that led a group of friends in Boston's Beacon Hill neighborhood to create the village concept. Beacon Hill Village began accepting members in 2002; Capitol Hill Village was one of the first to successfully duplicate the model.

In addition to rides and other favors that volunteers can provide, most villages offer what they call a "concierge service" -- a connection to a list of pre-screened vendors who can provide discounted services such as plumbing or home repair.

About half of the nation's villages are concentrated in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic. Between 10,000 and 13,000 people are members, according to the Village-to-Village Network, which tracks and coordinates villages around the country. The Washington area is a hotbed for villages, with five within the District of Columbia and three more in the Maryland and Virginia suburbs.

Those statistics, though, underscore the limitations of the village concept: Most are located in densely populated, relatively affluent urban or suburban communities. Their members are also overwhelmingly white -- more than 90 percent, according to a survey last year by the University of California, Berkeley.

Despite their members' deep pockets, no village has managed to fund itself through membership fees alone. All rely . . . on donations, grants or, in some cases, the willingness of directors to run them for free.

Andrew Scharlach, a Berkeley gerontologist who's conducted the most extensive academic research on villages, said the village movement remains a boutique phenomenon. But he believes there's potential for growth, and he doesn't think memberships -- which tend to average between \$500 and \$700 a year -- are cost-prohibitive in most cases.

"Two dollars, a dollar and a half a day is conceivably affordable," Scharlach said. "I think one might conclude that the price of admission, the membership fee by itself, is not going to

be an overwhelming barrier for people of modest means."

Scharlach and other experts note that as baby boomers age, the demand for traditional services for the elderly will only increase, making villages a more attractive option. Maureen Cavaiola, the executive director of At Home Chesapeake, a village in Severna Park, Md., said the village model appeals to independent-minded boomers who don't want to think of themselves as old.

Many villages have subsidized memberships for those who can't afford the full price of a membership. Beacon Hill, for example, charges \$640 for an individual membership and \$925 for a household, but low-income members pay \$110 for an individual or \$160 for a household. About a quarter of Beacon Hill's members are in the subsidized program, and there's a small waiting list for inclusion, executive director Judy Willet said.

Established villages like Beacon Hill and Capitol Hill have sophisticated fundraising operations, but even Beacon Hill lost members during the recession. Others are on much shakier ground.

Gerontologist Nancy Intermill founded Midtown Village in Lincoln, Neb., in 2009, with the help of a federal stimulus grant from the city. It's one of the few villages in the Great Plains, and it's based in a moderate-income community. About 20 households are members in the village, which has no paid staff, Intermill included. She's hoping to get it on solid footing in the next few years before she moves out of state.

The village charges \$480 for an annual household membership, which Intermill describes as "a real big sticker shock for some."

"Some understand it. They get it immediately and realize what the benefits are," Intermill said. "Others think about it and think, 'I don't need that right now,' or 'I can't imagine spending that much.'"

Cavaiola volunteers her time to lead At Home Chesapeake, another small village with 35 members. She's exploring partnerships with companies that want to reach her member base, but unless she can dramatically increase membership, her village faces a bleak future.

"It's not sustainable, no, absolutely not. But I'm willing to push it through, probably another two years," Cavaiola said. "I feel we're on the cusp."

Other villages have tried to entice members with much-lower prices. The One Call Club in Knoxville, Tenn., was launched with the help of a grant and charges just \$50 for a membership. But the grant runs out in July, program manager Kathy Sergeant said, and it needs 2,700 members to be sustainable. It has 500 members.

The University of Tennessee evaluates One Call Club members and has found that emergency room visits have declined among people who join the village. Members have also reported that their overall health has either held steady or improved since joining.

Some villages are open to middle-aged people or to people of all ages. Casey Chandler, 65, has been a member of Capitol Hill Village since it launched, and so far she's volunteered to help others more than she's used the services. But she still says she's getting her money's worth.

Those who rely on villages can't imagine living any other way. Irving Lindenblad, 82, joined Palisades Village in northwest Washington a few years ago along with his wife, who died last year. Lindenblad has kidney cancer, and would have moved into assisted living if it wasn't for the village. Instead, he's staying in the house and neighborhood he loves.

"If you already have your own house, this opens up a whole new field for you. ... Every one of the volunteers I've had has been very high-quality, educated and so on," Lindenblad said. "What surprised me pleasantly is how much of a spirit of generosity there is in the community."