

A decorative graphic consisting of a large, thin yellow arc that starts near the top right and curves down towards the bottom right. A horizontal black line and a vertical black line intersect at the bottom right, with a small yellow square at the intersection. A green square is located in the top left corner, with a small yellow square at its bottom right corner.

**Neighbors Helping  
Neighbors: A Qualitative  
Study of Villages Operating  
in the District of Columbia**

October 2009



# **Neighbors Helping Neighbors: A Qualitative Study of Villages Operating in the District of Columbia**

**Report Prepared by Terri Guengerich**

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## **Acknowledgements**

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# Background

AARP has conducted numerous studies on long-term care in the last five years. One important and consistent finding from these studies is that most people want to “age-in-place” or remain in their homes as they age. Grassroots organizations called “Villages” are emerging in communities across the country to help make this a viable option. Villages help people remain safely and comfortably at home – and socially connected to their neighborhoods – even as their physical needs change.

The first Village, Beacon Hill Village in Boston, was founded in 2001. It served as a model for neighborhood organizers in the District of Columbia and nationwide to develop their own neighborhood-based, non-profit organizations that deliver programs and services to help their members to age-in-place. The six Villages currently operating in the District of Columbia offer a myriad of services to make daily living activities easier for people as they age. Some of these services include: transportation to and from such places as doctor’s appointments, the grocery store, the pharmacy, or post office; meal preparation or delivery; light home maintenance – handyman or odd jobs; help with computers, the Internet, or electronic devices; help with running errands; and respite care. Other services available to members are removal of leaves in the fall and snow in the winter; help with record keeping and filling out insurance forms or other paperwork; tending to plants and mail while away; gardening advice and assistance; medical advocacy; and reading help to the visually impaired.

District Villages also provide their members with a social connection to their neighborhood. They link members with common interests in book clubs or chess clubs. They offer informational seminars on topics such as reverse mortgages; exercise classes, like yoga or walking; and trips to theatres, museums, and gardens. They provide companionship through friendly visits or calls to members.

Most of these services are delivered by a corps of volunteers living in the neighborhood, who are recruited, screened, and trained by the Village. Hence, District Villages are really “neighbors helping neighbors.”

For those services that volunteers cannot provide, the Villages provide access to a group of vetted local service providers, such as plumbers, carpenters or electricians, through SeniorChecked or Washington Consumers’ Checkbook. Some Villages also keep their own list of service providers recommended by their members.

AARP District of Columbia has been working with District Villages since 2007 when they held a workshop for local organizers interested in pursuing the concept. The office has supported Villages with demographic and mapping services and introduced them to AARP members in their service areas. AARP DC has also raised awareness of the Village model through its newsletter and website and through a workshop at last year’s AARP National Life@50 Event and Expo. AARP DC commissioned this qualitative study of District Villages.

# Methodology

Staff from AARP DC and Knowledge Management met with all six Villages operating in the District as of April, 2009. Five of the six Villages agreed to participate in this study:

- Capitol Hill Village
- Dupont Circle Village
- Kalorama Village
- Northwest Neighbors Village
- Palisades Village

Read more about each Village in Appendix A.

This study had three components: a questionnaire, in-depth interviews, and discussion groups.

In August, 2009, each Village was mailed a questionnaire seeking information about their basic operations including services provided, organizational structure, and membership. All Villages completed the questionnaires.

Beginning on August 17, 2009 and continuing through the end of September, Woelfel Research conducted in-depth interviews with Village board members (n=12), volunteers (n=9), and members (n=24). Each Village, except Kalorama Village, submitted the names of three board members, three volunteers, and eight members of their Village who have received services for these interviews. Kalorama Village submitted the names of three board members. Since no members of Kalorama Village have requested services to date, only two members were interviewed using a modified interview guide. No volunteer names were submitted as Kalorama Village has not yet provided any services with volunteers. Separate interview guides were prepared for board members, volunteers, and members.

Finally, on September 21, 2009, discussion group meetings were held separately with board members, volunteers, and Village staff. These meetings were moderated professionally by Dan Hough of Alan Newman Research.

# Summary of Findings

Many valuable thoughts and ideas were shared by Village board members, volunteers, members, and staff throughout the course of this research. One central theme identified was the lack of a “national voice” for Villages. Such a voice could raise awareness of the role Villages play in helping people stay in their homes as they age and could build a nationwide expectation that every community needs a Village.

A summary of the key best practices and recommendations are identified below. A more detailed list of practices and recommendations are found on page ten.

## Starting a New Village

- Be flexible and open to a change in plans as you go. A board member explained, “we started building a cabin, and now we have a mansion.”
- Know the demographics and needs of your community.
- Start small and grow. Don’t launch until you have sufficient money on hand to sustain operations for at least one year. This will alleviate stress and increase member confidence.

## Building a Strong Board of Directors

- Have the right mix of people on your board. Include experts in business, sales, fundraising, legal issues, finance, and someone familiar with your local government. Include a “closer” – someone who can get potential members to sign up, and a cheerleader to keep everyone motivated and enthusiastic.
- Board composition may need to transition after the Village is operational, with a shift in balance from passionate and visionary “pioneers” to individuals with the skills to sustain a long-term organization.

## Recruiting Members

- Membership recruitment is most effective through one-on-one interactions like small group dinners, coffee or tea parties, etc.
- Highlight “concierge” or convenience services that appeal to all members. Anybody might want a volunteer to wait for a cable installer or repair person, take in his or her mail, or water plants while on vacation, provide computer assistance, etc.

## **Retaining Members**

- Provide new members with a personal, face-to-face orientation about your programs and services, including how to contact the Village. A member handbook is also important.
- People in general – and older Americans in particular – don't like to ask for help. You need to train members that it is okay to ask for help from the Village. "You paid for this!" Because if they don't take advantage of your services, they may not renew.

## **Operating A Village**

- Seek in-kind donations of all types including office space, bookkeeping, and legal advice.
- If other Villages are close by, contact them about pooling resources or seeking discounts for bookkeeping, insurance liability, background checks, developing a database or computer program to track member requests, etc.

## **Fundraising**

- Get personal in fundraising. Include a targeted letter with a specific request and sign it by hand.
- Offer a "membership plus" or reduced membership fee to attract low-income members. Funders are more receptive to subsidizing Villages with low-income members.

## **Managing Volunteers**

- Follow-up immediately when someone offers to sign on as a volunteer.
- Find ways to recognize your volunteers.
- Let volunteers know that it is okay to say "no" to an assignment. This reduces the chances of burn out and of them quitting.

## **Communicating With Members**

- Email and phone are the most effective ways to communicate with members.

# FINDINGS

## Village Member Insights from In-Depth Interviews

Most Village members participating in our in-depth interviews were retired and around 77 years of age. Most heard about the Village from a friend or neighbor. Many reasons were given for their decision to join. Among the most common were:

- The desire to remain at home and stay in their community. Many did not want to move to a retirement community, an assisted living facility, or a nursing home.
- Belief in the concept. They want to support the movement in their neighborhood.
- The need for services. They had an immediate need for services, especially transportation. Many wanted to spare their families the trouble of dealing with small problems, such as changing a light bulb or fixing a leaky faucet.
- As a form of insurance. They didn't need the services yet, but wanted to be sure they were available for them in the future.
- For the neighborhood connection. They wanted to meet other people in their community and liked the social activities.

### **The most heavily used member service is transportation.**

Nearly all of these transportation trips were to and from medical appointments. The second most commonly used service were handyman services such as moving furniture or hanging pictures or mirrors. Third came services involving computers and electronics, such as help burning discs, programming TVs and DVDs, and solving computer problems. These services were generally provided by Village volunteers.

All of the members interviewed had used Village services at least once, but many did not consider themselves “regular” users. All were extremely or very satisfied with the services they received. One member summed it up by saying, “I wanted something done and it got done. I mean, really, it’s just as simple as that.”

### **Members say the annual membership fee is about right.**

Nearly all members say the fee is not too high or too low, but is just about right. Only one member thought the fee was too high.

### **Members say the Village regularly engages them and enhances their quality of life and connection to the community.**

All but two members say the Village engages them and enhances their quality of life. Many members elaborated further by saying:

- “I’ve enjoyed spending time with and getting to know [my neighbors] and that’s been an unexpected benefit.”
- “I just feel like I’ve got somebody behind me and that I’m just not out here alone ...it’s a comfortable feeling to know that I can call on them and whatever I need will be taken care of.”
- “If it wasn’t for the Village, I would have been almost completely cut off with the exception of a few people, and I feel like now I’m a part of the community.”

### **Members prefer to be contacted by the Village via email or telephone.**

Villages use multiple modes to communicate with their members, including email, their website, telephone, newsletters, mailings, and meetings. Most members prefer that the Village contacts them through email or by telephone. Most members have access to the Internet from home and send and receive email at least every other day.

### **Members plan to renew their membership.**

All members said they planned to renew their Village membership when it expired. Members explained that they needed the services their Village provided and that when they need help, it will be there. One member said “I’ve been satisfied with the help I’ve received, and I feel it’s a good program and well worth the money spent.” Another adds, “it’s an investment in our community.”

Members say the biggest strengths of their Village are the sense of community and its volunteers.

### **Nearly all members say they are getting a “good value for their money;” all say they are extremely or very satisfied with their Village; and nearly all say they would recommend that their family and friends join a Village.**

One member summed it up by saying, “Having the opportunity to live out your life on your terms is such a fantastic thing.”

## **Village Volunteer Insights from In-Depth Interviews**

About two-thirds of Village volunteers participating in our in-depth interviews were working and about one-third were retired. Most were around 61 years of age, and had been volunteering for the Village for about 10 months. Most volunteers had provided transportation services. Some spent several hours a week volunteering while others volunteered only a few hours each month. No volunteers were reimbursed for any expenses they incurred while volunteering.

## **Most volunteers were not recruited directly by the Village.**

Most volunteers found the Village rather than the Village finding them. Several volunteered because they read about the Village in a newspaper. Others heard about it from a neighbor and went to a meeting or activity.

All volunteers went through a screening process by their Village. This process included an interview and a background check. For volunteers who were providing transportation, an additional driving record check was made as well as documenting proof of insurance.

After volunteers provide a service to a member, they document the service provided via email or a form. The Village then follows up with the member who received the service.

## **All volunteers say they are extremely or very satisfied with their experiences and that they plan on continuing to volunteer for their Village.**

One volunteer explains his high satisfaction saying, “I have absolutely no complaints. It works well, they’re efficient, and it’s just gone very smoothly.” Another volunteer says “I’ve discovered that you get more out of it than you put in.”

## **Board Member Insights from In-Depth Interviews**

Most Village board members participating in our in-depth interviews were retired, around 69 years of age, and had been on the board about 21 months. A little over half were original members of their Village board. One lesson they had learned through their service was the need to adapt a “learn as you go” philosophy, as there is no step-by-step process to follow. Every Village, neighborhood, and community is different. Other advice these founding members would give to other Villages includes:

- Choose your board carefully – include people who share the same vision and commitment
- There will be setbacks – but be flexible and stay motivated and enthusiastic
- Start small and grow rather than start big and have to cut back
- Gather information – do a neighborhood survey

## **The biggest challenges Villages face are member recruitment and member retention.**

Member recruitment and retention, especially in an economic downturn, topped the list of challenges. Another challenge mentioned was sustainability including the need for enough money to continue to pay their executive directors. However, most board members believed that they would be able to sustain their Village in 2010. And when members were asked about where they saw their Village in the next 3 to 5 years, they saw a self-sustaining Village with a large membership.

Board members believed that fundraising was critical to their Village’s success, and most had expertise on their board in fundraising and grant-writing. One member had this insight:

“Our biggest handicap is our biggest strength – that we are neighborhood-centered, so large companies have no interest in you.”

**The greatest strength of Villages is their cadre of committed board members and volunteers; the greatest weakness is their membership size.**

As one board member put it, “our biggest strength is simply the ability to pull together a group of people who are interested in keeping the Village concept going.” As for weakness, the key is membership – more membership means more services, more staff, more funding.

**Overall, board members believe they are getting a good “return on their investment,” are satisfied with their board experience, and plan to continue their membership on the board.**

All board members interviewed say they are getting a “good return” on their time and participation they have invested in their Villages. They were satisfied with their experience and wanted to continue as board members. One member said the board experience “has changed my perspective. I now feel very relaxed about any bad thing happening to us.” Another said, “I’m meeting people and doing things that I don’t think in this stage of my life I’d be doing and that’s an enriching experience.”

## Insights from Discussions with Volunteers, Board Members, and Staff

### Why do members join a Village?

People love their homes and their neighborhoods – they’ve lived in them for a long time. They do not want to live in a retirement community, an assisted living facility, or a nursing home. They don’t want to disrupt their lives or their children’s lives if something happens to them. They don’t want to give up their pets. They don’t want to lose their independence.

Most Village members fit into three scenarios – those members who really need the service and understand the concept; those not yet ready for any services, who join for insurance purposes (they live alone or they have no children or their children live far away); and those that join for the connection to their community and neighbors, for the social activities, or to support the Village movement.

Some members have friends and neighbors who would take them to the grocery store or help with other needs, but chose to join the Village instead. They prefer utilizing a service they have bought and paid for instead of asking for a favor from a neighbor. It makes them feel more independent.

## **What are the most effective ways to recruit members?**

The Villages agreed that one-on-one, face-to-face encounters at home gatherings or small group dinners or lunches were the most effective venues for recruitment.

How best to “message” a Village to potential members was the topic of much discussion. Villages have been advised repeatedly not to mention aging in their marketing. When they “pitch” potential members, they often hear that Villages are a great idea, just not one they need yet. “People don’t like to be characterized as older or in need.”

A number of the Villages address this issue by marketing themselves as an “insurance policy.” They talked about “peace of mind,” connectivity, and knowing there is someone there. Villages also focused on the concierge or convenience services that are of benefit to anyone at any age – someone to wait for a repair person while they are at work, take in mail while they are on vacation, or help with a computer problem. One Village volunteer pointed to all of the cost savings members incur from free rides to the doctor or grocery stores, discounts on restaurants and services, free computer help, etc. Another broke down the membership fee by month so it would sound more reasonable.

## **How have Villages reached out to lower-income neighborhood residents?**

Most of the Villages considered it a priority to recruit lower income neighbors and offer them a discounted membership they called “membership plus.” They believed the costs for their membership plus programs could be offset by foundation support. However, reaching this community has been a challenge. One Village has had some success reaching out through neighborhood churches. Another believes messaging is part of the problem, and is working with a university researcher to explore new ways to market its programs and services to people with low-incomes.

## **What’s the best way to communicate with members?**

Villages used multiple communications tools to reach their members – email, telephone, website, monthly calendar, newsletter, mailings, and meetings. The majority of Village members had access to a computer at home and responded to email. However, that was not always the case. According to one executive director, “My most effective communication tool is the most time intensive – the phone.” Another Village said that when a member requests information through snail mail they offer free computer training, because in many cases their members have computers, they just need some help in using them.

## **What percentage of members use Village services?**

The percentage of members using services per month varied dramatically among the Villages. In most Villages, a small number of “repeat” users accounted for the large share of service performed. Transportation was by far the most requested service.

Board members, volunteers, and staff all discussed the importance of encouraging members to take advantage of services. They need to proactively check in with members and see if they need a service. When a member calls for one service, one Village urges him or her to consider other services. “You have to be a kind of investigator, finding out what the need is.” Another made the point that it doesn’t require members to rationalize the requests they make. “When they don’t ask, I worry that they won’t renew. We add new services every time the phone rings.”

One Village’s philosophy about providing services is, “if something is causing you to stumble, call and see if the Village can help.” Another philosophy is “our Village will answer any member’s request within reason.”

### **What are the biggest challenges facing your Village?**

Membership growth and retention. As one executive director put it, “Our biggest challenge is membership, membership, membership.” All recognized this as a key to sustainability. Fundraising was a serious concern as well. One Village noted that this is a specialized skill that many small non-profit organizations do not have.

Other issues that emerged were the difficulty in finding volunteers who could help during the day (working hours) and the challenge of developing a board that could meet the needs of the Village as it changed and grew.

## **Best Practices and Recommendations**

Many valuable thoughts and ideas were shared by Village board members, volunteers, members, and staff throughout the course of this research. One central theme identified was the lack of a “national voice” for Villages. Such a voice could raise awareness of the role Villages play in helping people to stay in their homes as they age and could build a nationwide expectation that every community needs a Village.

Best practices and recommendations shared throughout the course of this research have been grouped into the following categories.

### **Starting a New Village**

- Seek advice from other Villages, but don’t be discouraged by their difficulties. Keep your eye on the prize.
- Be flexible and open to a change in plans as you go. A board member explained, “we started building a cabin, and now we have a mansion.”
- Know the demographics and needs of your community.
- Clearly define your service boundaries.

- Start small and grow. Don't launch until you have sufficient money on hand to sustain operations for at least one year. This will alleviate stress and increase member confidence.
- Hire staff before the Village starts providing services.

## **Building a Strong Board of Directors**

- Have the right mix of people on your board. Include experts in business, sales, fundraising, legal issues, finance, and someone familiar with your local government. Include a "closer" – someone who can get potential members to sign up and a cheerleader to keep members motivated and enthusiastic.
- Make sure that board members share a common vision. If possible, bring together people who have worked together in other community ventures to increase the odds that they'll know the process and the people to go to for advice and financial support.
- Board composition may need to transition after the Village is operational, with a shift in balance from passionate and visionary "pioneers" to individuals with the skills to sustain a long-term organization.

## **Recruiting Members**

- Membership recruitment is most effective through one-on-one interactions like small group dinners, coffee or tea parties, etc.
- Highlight "concierge" or convenience services that appeal to all members. Anybody might want a volunteer to wait for a cable installer or repair person, take in his or her mail, or water plants while on vacation, provide computer assistance, etc.
- Market your Village as services, social activities, and insurance. Selling it as an insurance concept alone will get an "I don't need that right now" response.

## **Retaining Members**

- Provide new members with a personal, face-to-face orientation about your programs and services, including how to contact the Village. A member handbook is also important.
- People in general – and older Americans in particular – don't like to ask for help. You need to train members that it is okay to ask for help from the Village. "You paid for this!" Because if they don't take advantage of your services, they may not renew.
- If a member isn't using services, regularly call them and check in. When a member requests one service, encourage him or her to use another.
- When members request a service, don't ask for a rationale, provide the service and get them to use another. Probe to get at what their needs are. Follow-up to see if the member is satisfied with the service. Be proactive – call members frequently who don't use services regularly.

## **Operating A Village**

- Seek in-kind donations of all types including office space, bookkeeping, and legal advice.
- If other Villages are close by, contact them about pooling resources or seeking discounts for bookkeeping, insurance liability, background checks, developing a database or computer program to track member requests, etc.
- Make sure there is a clear separation between board responsibilities and staff responsibilities.
- Offer easy payment options such as monthly payments, online payments, discounts for early renewal, etc.
- Make a concerted effort to get member diversity – age, gender, socio-economic status.

## **Fundraising**

- Get personal in fundraising. Include a targeted letter with a specific request and sign it by hand.
- Offer a “membership plus” or reduced membership fees to attract low-income members. Funders are more receptive to subsidizing Villages with low-income members.

## **Managing Volunteers**

- Follow up immediately when someone offers to sign on as a volunteer.
- Find ways to recognize your volunteers.
- Let volunteers know that it is okay to say “no” to an assignment. This reduces the chances of burn out and of them quitting.
- Rotate volunteers so they don’t burn out on one client – unless the volunteer wants to work repeatedly with a specific client.

## **Communicating with Members**

- Email and phone are the most effective ways to communicate with members.
- Newsletters and websites are also effective, especially for non-members.

# **Appendix A**

## **Profiles of District of Columbia Villages**

### **Capitol Hill Village (CHV)**

Capitol Hill Village is the oldest Village in the District of Columbia – its neighborhood is 2.5 square miles. This Village was conceptualized in March, 2006 and began providing services in August, 2007. This Village currently has 15 members on its Board of Directors and employs nearly 2.0 FTE (full-time equivalent) staff positions. Its office space is donated.

To join the Village, an individual pays \$530 and a household pays \$800 per year. CHV provides membership discounts for people with low-incomes in their neighborhood. It has no age requirement for members. CHV produces a monthly newsletter for members distributed via email and mail. CHV provides services to members 24/7 – 24 hours a day for 7 days a week.

CHV provides services to members primarily through volunteers – volunteers provide about 80 percent of services in a given month.

For more information about this Village:

Capitol Hill Village  
Box 15126  
Washington, DC 20003-0126  
E-mail: [info@capitolhillvillage.org](mailto:info@capitolhillvillage.org)  
Website: [www.capitolhillvillage.org](http://www.capitolhillvillage.org)  
Phone: (202) 543-1778

### **Dupont Circle Village (DCV)**

Located in northwest DC and covering the Dupont Circle area, this Village was conceptualized in September, 2007 and began providing services in the fall of 2008. This Village currently has 9 members on its Board of Directors and employs nearly one (0.75 FTE – full-time equivalent) staff position. Its office space is donated.

To join the Village, an individual pays \$450 and a household pays \$600 per year. DCV provides membership discounts for people with low-incomes in their neighborhood. It has no age requirement for members. DCV produces a monthly newsletter for members distributed via email and mail. DCV provides services to members 24/7 – 24 hours a day for 7 days a week.

DCV provides services to members primarily through volunteers – volunteers provide nearly all of services in a given month.

For more information about this Village:

Dupont Circle Village  
Dupont Circle Community Resource Center  
9 Dupont Circle, NW  
Washington, DC 20036  
Email: [contact@dupontcirclevillage.org](mailto:contact@dupontcirclevillage.org)  
Website: [www.dupontcirclevillage.org](http://www.dupontcirclevillage.org)  
Phone: (202) 436-5252

### **Kalorama Village (KV)**

Located in northwest DC along Embassy Row, this Village was conceptualized in May, 2007 and began providing services in May, 2008. This Village currently has 12 members on its Board of Directors and employs no staff, making this Village unique from the others in this study. KV is a completely volunteer-driven model with no paid staff.

To join the Village, an individual pays \$50 and a household pays \$75 per year. To join, members must be age 50 or older.

For more information about this Village:

Kalorama Village, Inc.  
2126 Connecticut Avenue, NW, #52  
Washington, DC 20008  
Email: [info@kaloramavillage.org](mailto:info@kaloramavillage.org)  
Website: [www.kaloramavillage.org](http://www.kaloramavillage.org)

### **Northwest Neighbors Village (NNV)**

Northwest Neighbors Village serves the Chevy Chase area of DC. This Village was conceptualized in May, 2007 and began providing services in March, 2009. This Village currently has 9 members on its Board of Directors and employs nearly one (0.75 FTE – full-time equivalent) staff position. Its office space is donated.

To join the Village, an individual pays \$500 and a household pays \$750 per year. NNV provides membership discounts for people with low-incomes in their neighborhood. It has no age requirement for members. NNV produces a monthly newsletter for members distributed via email and mail. NNV provides services to members 24/7 – 24 hours a day for 7 days a week.

NNV provides services to members primarily through volunteers – volunteers provide nearly all of services in a given month.

For more information about this Village:

Northwest Neighbors Village  
5425 Western Avenue, NW  
Washington , DC 20015  
E-mail: [nnvccdc@aol.com](mailto:nnvccdc@aol.com)  
Website: [www.nwnv.org](http://www.nwnv.org)  
Phone: (202) 237-1895

### **Palisades Village (PV)**

Palisades Village serves the neighborhoods of Foxhall and Palisades in northwest DC. This Village was conceptualized in the spring of 2006 and began providing services in January, 2009. This Village currently has 10 members on its Board of Directors and employs nearly one (0.75 FTE – full-time equivalent) staff position. Its office space is rented.

To join this Village, an individual pays \$500 and a household of two or more pays \$750 per year. PV provides membership discounts for people with low-incomes in their neighborhood. It has no age requirement for members. PV produces a bi-monthly newsletter for members distributed via email and mail. PV provides services to members during weekdays as well as weekends.

PV provides services to members primarily through volunteers – volunteers provide about 93 percent of services in a given month.

For more information about this Village:

Palisades Village  
P.O. Box 40403  
Washington , DC 20016-0403  
E-mail: [info@palisadesvillage.org](mailto:info@palisadesvillage.org)  
Website: [www.palisadesvillage.org](http://www.palisadesvillage.org)  
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