

The Village: A Key Option for Older Adults

In 2050, the population aged 65 and over is projected to be 88.7 million, almost double the estimated 43.1 million in 2012.¹ Ninety percent of these older Americans want to stay in their own homes for as long as possible.² The fact that two of three older Americans have multiple chronic conditions³ and will need some level of support to stay in their communities has inspired the rapidly growing village movement: consumer-driven social support organizations that aim to enhance the social engagement, independence, and well-being of community-dwelling seniors through a combination of social activities, volunteer opportunities, service referral, and direct assistance.

There are 190 villages, most in the U.S., but they are now appearing in other countries; an additional 185 are in the development stage.⁴ Although there are some villages that are part of larger organizations, most are independent non-profit organizations funded through annual membership fees, contributions (from neighbors and local businesses), and grants to subsidize the cost for low-income individuals. Villages collaborate through the national [Village to Village Network](#), sharing successes and challenges, helping new villages get started and established villages to mature.

Villages reflect the needs of their individual communities and there are variations in design, but all are dedicated to supporting neighbors who wish to remain in their homes as they age. All villages address the isolation that often affects the health, well-being and quality of life of many older adults.⁵ Even those with a network of family and friends often do not want to rely on them for everyday tasks. Villages bring people together through educational, social and cultural activities, and by linking a member with a volunteer "friendly visitor."

Villages typically rely on volunteers to provide services and perform administrative tasks, and volunteering itself keeps one connected to the community as a whole and to other individuals.

Many villages offer services and support that significantly increase the probability that a member can remain relatively independent. Members call one telephone number to request assistance. Transportation is the most utilized service: Volunteers take members to health care appointments or the grocery store, for example. They assist with errands and household tasks, take care of a pet or even make sure all is well at home if a member is on vacation. Villages often connect members with prescreened providers such as home health agencies, electricians and plumbers. A volunteer might help with home organization and then connect to an organization that will pick up donated items.

[Penn's Village](#), serving Center City Philadelphia, has a new program, [Health Pals](#), helping members to be informed and proactive patients and therefore more likely to be compliant with the course of care recommended by their health care providers. Among the multiple factors within the complex issue of compliance may be the complexity of the medical explanation, the stress of the situation and the fact that the patient may be intimidated and afraid to ask questions, and the reality that some patients simply forget.⁶

A trained Health Pal volunteer will help a member formulate questions prior to an appointment, fill out forms, be a "second set of ears" then compare notes to make sure that all have heard the same thing. The Health Pal volunteer will assist with follow-up instructions such as scheduling appointments, picking up prescriptions

and setting up a reminder system so that medications are taken as prescribed. Through a partnership with Centennial Health Services, members receive one-on-one at-home medication counseling. The Penn's Village Health Pals leadership team is in the process of meeting with area health care providers to explore how best to work together to improve social and health outcomes for shared members and patients.

In May of 2014 researchers from the University of California at Berkeley published a study aimed to assess the perceived impact of Village membership on factors associated with the likelihood of aging in place. They surveyed 282 active Village members from five sites in California. Fifty three percent of village members reported a better quality of life since joining their village. Forty five percent felt happier and 33% perceived themselves to be healthier. Sixty-three percent talked to more people, 40% left home more and 39% felt less lonely. Eighty-one percent reported being able to get more help and 28% more able to get medical care.⁷

Atul Gawande, in his New York Times bestseller *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End*, refers to the village movement several times and notes that the founders of such organizations were "committed to a singular aim. They all believed that you didn't need to sacrifice autonomy just because you needed help in your life."⁸ *Forbes Magazine* lists villages as number one of 10 caregiving tips for anyone turning 50 in 2014 (and those who are already there): "It takes a village. Go find one. Ninety percent of seniors, perhaps including your own parents, want to remain in their homes as long as possible. Connecting with the Village Movement is one way to fulfill that goal."⁹

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The Village to Village Network website, vtvnetwork.org, includes an interactive map to locate a village in a particular geographic area. Penn's Village can be contacted at 215-925-7333 or info@pennsvillage.org.

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