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AARP studies D.C. seniors who join aging-in-place networks

By Annie Gowen
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A recent [AARP study](#) of D.C. seniors who joined "aging-in-place" networks say the move has made them feel more engaged in their communities and more comfortable with their decision to stay in their homes.

Researchers from AARP interviewed dozens of residents and volunteers from five "villages" -- in Capitol Hill, Dupont Circle, Kalorama, Chevy Chase and Palisades -- to find out what works and what doesn't in these grass-roots communities, which have proliferated in the region in the past few years.

In some graying neighborhoods, residents have banded together and paid a yearly fee for social activities and access to a network of volunteers, or vetted contractors who can help them with tasks such as rides and computer help. In some larger villages, the network is managed by an executive director or other paid staff.

Experts say the networks, modeled on a village that sprang up in the [Beacon Hill](#) area of Boston in 2001, are a viable option for seniors who, polls say, overwhelmingly prefer to stay in their homes as long as possible.

"It's an emerging trend we think will continue to gain traction over time," said Elinor Ginzler, senior vice president for livable communities at AARP.

The AARP chose to study the District because, except for San Francisco, the region has more of these villages than any other area in the country: about 15 operating or in development in the District, Maryland and Virginia.

"It's astonishing this region has so many communities formed," Ginzler said. "That is not typical."

She said the growth was probably because of the number of retired federal government and political types here -- or, as she put it, "organizing kind of people" -- congregated in such a densely populated urban area.

According to the study, the typical respondent was a 77-year-old retiree who had been recruited to join the network by a friend or neighbor. The seniors' most pressing needs were for transportation, most often to and from medical appointments, followed by handyman work and help with computer issues or programming televisions and DVD players.

Luce de Vitry, a retired Howard University professor, joined a [network](#) last year in her Palisades neighborhood, which charges an annual fee of \$500 or \$750 for households with two or more members. She says she finds it "a comfort" to know she can turn to the network for rides to the doctor and other help,

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particularly because her grown children live far away.

Judy Canning, 68, a retired librarian who helped found the [Capitol Hill Village](#), said that since the organization got up and running in 2007, she has been surprised at how many neighbors her age she has met at potluck dinners and gatherings at the Monocle watering hole, some of whom have also lived in the neighborhood for years.

"The thing that surprised us was all the new people we've met who have also lived here a long time," she said. "The social networking has been a big surprise for us and also rewarding."

Canning said that it's sometimes a struggle to get other seniors to join. Survey respondents say that fundraising and amassing a big enough cadre of volunteers can be challenging.

Peggy Simpson, 71, a journalist and the president of the Dupont Circle [Village](#), said she was stymied searching for a volunteer to shovel out some of her members during the season's first snowstorm in December, although she has more than enough helpers now.

Advocates of village networks say they can be a viable option for seniors who want to avoid assisted living and retirement communities as long as possible. So far, volunteers have helped members of Simpson's group with laundry, bathroom repairs and even retrofitting a historic home with an elevator.

"I don't want to be in an institutional setting where everybody is old," she said. "That's a feeling shared by everybody in the village movement."

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