





it takes a VILLAGE

The **aging in place** movement is gaining momentum as communities throughout Montgomery County band together to help elderly neighbors

By Archana Pyati

Listening to them chat on an afternoon drive through Bethesda, it's easy to forget that Marion Robertson and Pat Schleifer became friends just over a year ago. They talk of happenings in their Chevy Chase neighborhood, share stories about recent vacations and debate the merits of their book club's latest selection.

As natural as it is, the women's rapport was forged in response to a serious medical need.

Twelve years ago, Schleifer became blind from retinitis pigmentosa, a condition that first appeared when she was in her late 30s. Losing her sight was a blow to the exuberant grandmother of 10, but a reality she adjusted to with the help of her five adult children.

More difficult for the now 81-year-old Schleifer has been managing a series of medical setbacks, including heart valve replacement surgery two years ago and, more recently, a hip replacement. Cardiac therapy appointments twice a week at Suburban Hospital in Bethesda have been an essential part of her recovery.

She previously relied on her children for rides, but the task of driving became overwhelming as they juggled caring for her with their own work and family responsibilities, Schleifer says.

GRAPHIC BY AMANDA SMALLWOOD

it takes a village

“She was always worried about being a burden,” says Babby Landon, Schleifer’s daughter, who lives in the house where she grew up.

So Schleifer joined Chevy Chase At Home, a senior “village” established in 2009 by a civic-minded group of neighbors to support aging residents who want to remain in their own homes. Chevy Chase At Home is one of 12 existing or emerging networks in Montgomery County that help seniors with a variety of practical matters, including transportation, buying groceries, performing household chores and repairs, and assisting with personal technology.

After Schleifer joined Chevy Chase At Home, she was paired with Robertson, who’s 79 and lives a few streets away. Schleifer knew her casually from when both worked as election precinct chairwomen. Every Thursday, Robertson drives her cherry-red Prius to Schleifer’s home, a two-story addition attached to Landon’s house, and takes her friend to cardiac therapy.

“I very much like Pat,” Robertson says as she waits at Suburban during her friend’s appointment. “It’s fun getting reacquainted with her.”

The village movement

is gaining momentum as more seniors choose to “age in place” rather than move into institutional settings, says Candace Baldwin, director of strategy for aging in community at Village to Village Network, a national clearinghouse for research and technical assistance based in Newton, Mass., and Arlington, Va.

Boston’s Beacon Hill village, officially the nation’s first, opened for business in 2002. There are now 93 villages operating across the country, up from 53 in 2010, Baldwin says.

She attributes the growth of villages to the new economic realities facing seniors, who may have lost retirement savings during the recent recession, making them less inclined to give up their homes, often their most valuable



Pat Schleifer (right) relies on neighbor Marion Robertson and other Chevy Chase at Home volunteers to drive her to weekly therapy appointments at Bethesda’s Suburban Hospital.

asset. Also, cuts in government spending on aging-related services like transportation, social outlets and meals programs have created a need for citizens to fill in some of the gaps, Baldwin says.

Some villages, including Chevy Chase At Home, are membership organizations that charge fees for a range of services and administrative staff, while others rely on volunteers and provide services for free. Village advocates say their goal isn’t to replace assisted living or skilled

nursing facilities, but to offer an alternative for those capable of remaining in their own neighborhoods.

Villages serve “people who don’t want to go to an institution,” says Irene Hoskins, president of Chevy Chase At Home and a former World Health Organization expert on aging. “They want to remain independent, but they may need some help.”

Participating in a village isn’t for everyone, though, particularly seniors in



declining health. “I think it’s important for people to really understand what the village can and can’t provide,” says Jacqueline Lapidus, executive director of Care Management Associates, a geriatric care management agency in Bethesda.

Villages may give seniors a “false sense of security about being able to stay safely in their present living situation.” She suggests the networks provide clear guidelines for what members can expect from volunteers.

Advocates say the village movement prides itself on being truly grassroots, with no top-down hierarchy or corporate structure dictating rules. “There is no cookie-cutter approach,” says Catherine McCallum, executive director of Chevy Chase At Home.

That view is reflected in the diversity of Montgomery County’s villages, located in neighborhoods from suburban North Bethesda to urban centers like downtown Silver Spring and rural areas like Olney.

The founders of Bethesda’s Burning Tree Village, the county’s first, developed their network after 440 households were mailed a survey in November 2007 asking whether they hoped to stay in their homes and gauging their interest in receiving or providing services. The survey also identified the types of assistance—such as home repairs, social visits, grocery shopping and transportation—that were most needed, village President Leslie Kessler says.

Of the 92 households that responded, nearly 84 percent of those occupied by people 65 and older expressed a desire to remain in their homes. Fifty-one percent of residents from responding households indicated their willingness to assist their neighbors.

Burning Tree, an all-volunteer village with no membership fees, now offers an array of services, including publishing a directory of vetted local vendors; checking on elderly neighbors through calls and visits; organizing social gath-

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erings; and coordinating transportation through a nonprofit partner, The Senior Connection.

But the village is at a crossroads, Kessler says, as its governing board debates whether to shift to a paid membership model to survive.

“Every village has to decide what it wants to be when it grows up,” she says. “If you want to stay small and neighborly, that’s great. But if we don’t find a way to sustain it, there has to be a way to continue.”

Chevy Chase At Home offers a full membership—\$500 annually for families; \$400 for singles—or a \$250 associate membership, McCallum says. Full memberships pay for benefits delivered directly to the home: transportation, household repairs, technology assistance, and social or caregiving visits. All members are eligible to attend the village’s lecture series and educational programs, and receive a directory of recommended home repair businesses, a village newsletter, and discounts to local contractors. In 2012, the village counted 119 households as members, provided 599 service calls and hosted 37 special events, McCallum says.

Though Chevy Chase At Home volunteers aren’t required to become members, many sign up at the associate level to support an organization they might one day need, McCallum says. The fees pay for her salary as part-time executive director, activity fees, insurance and printing costs.

Enticing younger adults to get involved as members and volunteers is

difficult but necessary, village organizers say. Volunteers tend to be older, like Robertson, and are often close in age to the residents they’re assisting.

“Part of the conundrum is: How do you deal with people who say, ‘I’m not ready for it yet,’” says Martine Brizius, co-chair of the Silver Spring Village Planning Group. If residents choose not to participate now, “how can we get it to where we will be ready for them when they do need it?”

Perhaps even more than the support and the services, what villages do best is help older residents feel more connected to their communities.

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When a senior loses a spouse, just getting through the day can be a challenge, says Miriam Kilty, president of Bethesda’s all-volunteer Bannockburn Neighbors Assisting Neighbors and vice president of the Washington Area Village Exchange. Widowhood makes it “hard for people to cook for one or even to cook at all,” Kilty says, which is why Bannockburn organizes monthly social gatherings.

Villages also provide the social connections that seniors need to stay mentally and emotionally engaged, which the county, with its “one-size-fits-all or

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safety-net-type program,” can’t provide,
Hartman says.

Nathan Billig, 71, a Chevy Chase At Home founding member and a clinical psychiatry professor at Georgetown University Medical Center, says the village “re-establishes what used to be natural in a small town when you did know all of your neighbors...and people did spend more time with each other.”

As co-chairwoman of Chevy Chase At Home’s social networking and program committee, Betty O’Connor, 83, organizes the group’s “meet and mingle” series and other social events to draw people out of their homes.

She currently employs two home health care attendants for her husband, Jack, 88, who has dementia, but she expects to use the village’s services with greater frequency as his condition deteriorates. For now, a village volunteer visits with him one evening a month when O’Connor has a standing social commitment.

“I look at [the village] as a blanket is for a child,” she says. “If I need them, I can call them. I don’t really need them a lot right now, but as things get worse, I can call on them to help me. That means a lot to me.” ■

Archana Pyati is a writer based in Silver Spring. To comment on this story, email comments@bethesdamagazine.com.

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