



# Increasing Social Connection Among Older Adults: Village membership matters!



## IN A RECENT SURVEY OF DC VILLAGE MEMBERS:

**96%** reported feeling more socially connected because of their Village membership.

**98%** reported feeling more socially connected when they volunteer with the Village.

### Why do social connections matter?

Human beings thrive on social connections, which are essential for both emotional well-being and physical health. On an emotional level, social connections reduce loneliness and isolation, which adults aged 65 and older in the United States experience at the highest rates.<sup>1</sup> Social connections also have real implications for physical health, with studies showing that a lack of social connection negatively impacts cardiovascular health outcomes, cognitive functioning, and susceptibility to infectious diseases.<sup>2</sup> In an aging population, the consequences of these risks are amplified.

### What evidence-informed strategies are effective at increasing social connection in older adults?

A variety of interventions aim to improve the existing social fabric for older adults, and ultimately reduce loneliness and isolation.<sup>3</sup> In a 2023 review of social prescription interventions, researchers identified four broad approaches: increasing social interactions, promoting mental and physical well-being, providing instrumental support, and improving social health through home and community care.<sup>4</sup> The researchers emphasized that individual, personalized approaches also improve social connection. Of particular interest is the finding that interventions were more successful when study participants actively engaged in and contributed to the activities, had a meaningful

role to play, and were part of a group that had a collective purpose. This is supported in other research that describes the social and other benefits older adults experience from volunteering.<sup>5</sup>

**“ [My Village] is the single biggest reason I have such strong connections within my neighborhood.”**

- 2024 SURVEY RESPONDENT

### How can and do Villages foster social connection?

Villages are neighborhood-based, non-profit organizations created by and for older adults that offer activities, companionship, practical support, and volunteer opportunities. In Washington DC, there are thirteen Villages, each representing a defined geographic area or neighborhood. While the 13 Villages in Washington DC operate independently and have different structures and membership sizes, the **wide range of activities and services that Villages offer aim to increase social connection among their members.** These include social support within the community during members’ times of need, regular social check-ins, and robust social, educational, and wellness programming. Village members also provide a wide range of volunteer services, which benefit the volunteer, the recipient, and the Village itself. Whether explicitly designed as a “social” activity or not, Village programs and services are designed to maximize feelings of connection among members.

## ON AVERAGE, FROM 2021 THROUGH 2024,<sup>6</sup> DC VILLAGES MEMBERS, AND VOLUNTEERS:

- ★ Supported over 12,000 friendly visits to members each year, including daily check-in calls, drop-in social visits, one-on-one conversational walks, and others.
- ★ Held more than 2,300 events each year, including social, cultural, wellness, and educational events.
- ★ Provided an average of 29,400 volunteer service hours per year, including volunteer rides, help around the house, and meal delivery.

In the summer of 2024, the 13 Villages in Washington DC conducted a member survey which asked, in part, about members' experiences with social connection and loneliness. A total of 953 Village members participated in the survey, representing over one-third of the total membership across all Villages.

“ I've enjoyed living in other neighborhoods in DC but never felt as connected as I do now that I'm a member of a Village.”  
- 2024 SURVEY RESPONDENT

Survey respondents reported being regularly active in their Villages and with other Village members. Nearly half (49%) **attended Village events and activities** in-person at least a few times a month. A similar proportion (43%) **got together socially with other Village members** outside of Village activities at least a few times a month. And over one-quarter (28%) **provided volunteer services** to other Village members at least a few times a month.

**96%** reported feeling more connected when they **participate** in Village activities in person. (n=824)

**91%** reported feeling more connected to their **community** because of the Village. (n=814)

**87%** felt they could **rely** on more people in their community because of the Village. (n=754)

## What are opportunities for further exploration and research?

Given their built-in mechanisms for increasing social connection, Villages merit consideration by any jurisdiction looking for ways to mitigate social isolation among older adults. Investing in the Village model ensures that older adults have access to highly individualized opportunities to create the kinds of connections they want and need. Additional research may be able to pinpoint the value of the social return on investment and encourage further financial support of the model across the United States.

Villages offer a community-driven solution for increasing social connection among older adults because they:

- ★ Establish and maintain a **community with a shared purpose**
- ★ Provide direct access to **social activities and volunteer opportunities**
- ★ Facilitate **new and strengthened relationships**, both directly and indirectly

<sup>1</sup> Schroyen, S., et al. (2023). Prevalence of loneliness in older adults: a scoping review. *Health & Social Care in the Community*, 2023(1), 7726692. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2023/7726692>

<sup>2</sup> Office of the Surgeon General (OSG). (2023). *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community*. US Department of Health and Human Services.

<sup>3</sup> Hoang, P., et al. (2022). Interventions Associated With Reduced Loneliness and Social Isolation in Older Adults: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis. *JAMA network open*, 5(10), e2236676. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2022.36676>

<sup>4</sup> Paquet, C., et al. (2023). Social Prescription Interventions Addressing Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults: Meta-Review Integrating On-the-Ground Resources. *Journal of medical Internet research*, 25, e40213. <https://doi.org/10.2196/40213>

<sup>5</sup> Nichol, B., et al. (2023). Exploring the Effects of Volunteering on the Social, Mental, and Physical Health and Well-being of Volunteers: An Umbrella Review. *Voluntas : international journal of voluntary and nonprofit organizations*, 1-32. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-023-00573-z>

<sup>6</sup> Data from quarterly reporting to the DC Villages Collaborative.

INITIATIVE LED BY:



EVALUATION LED BY:



INITIATIVE FUNDED BY:



This project was made possible by a grant to [Capitol Hill Village](#) from the [Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments](#) through the Federal Transit Administration's Enhanced Mobility program. Special thanks to the 13 Villages in the [DC Villages Collaborative](#) for sharing the 2024 survey with your members. This document was developed by [Sharp Insight, LLC](#).