

## SENIORS

## Villages: What a good neighbor would do

BY CELE GARRETT



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Nearly 20 years ago, a group of folks in a well-known Boston neighborhood organized an informal network of volunteers to help their older neighbors. This idea expanded into a bigger operation. By 2003, the group was a fully formed nonprofit known as Beacon Hill Village. Today BHV serves a large swath of Boston — well beyond its original neighborhood.

The basic idea is this: A person joins BHV by paying an annual membership fee. Members can request help with handyman-type tasks, rides to appointments, light maintenance at home, technical support, pet sitting and many other things.

Beacon Hill Village's model garnered press attention from major news outlets, sparking interest in cities and towns across the country. Indeed, one day over breakfast at the Royal Restaurant, two gentlemen named Richard Moose and Ernie Lehmann pondered whether "this village thing"

might work in Alexandria.

They joined forces with Dr. Judith Jones, a local gerontologist who had long studied the importance of socialization in older adults. These three recruited other like-minded people to explore the idea. This was the humble beginning of At Home in Alexandria, which opened its doors in 2011.

Today, each of the 271 operating villages across the country offers services based on the particular needs of its community. The core mission and function of these villages, however, is largely the same: to help members continue living an independent and vibrant life as they age. Villages provide practical, social and emotional support that can help make a member's daily life more pleasant,



FILE PHOTO

AHA members and volunteers often do their grocery shopping together.

allowing them to save their energy for the activities most important to them.

This practical support takes many forms. Essentially, villages offer the level of help a good neighbor would provide. Many AHA members enjoy a weekly trip to and from their salon. Several volunteers read regularly to members who have vision impairment. Often, a volunteer and member will do their grocery shopping together.

When a handrail needs tightening or heavy boxes need to be carted down from the attic, volunteers are up to the job. When someone's printer isn't getting along well with their computer, AHA can send a volunteer to tackle the issue. When members experience an unexpected event, AHA has a database of reliable and trustworthy service providers that have come recommended by members and volunteers.

It's difficult to sum up the

scope of support a village can provide. A village is not merely a service; it's a true community. AHA's village of neighbors watch out for one another and are there to lend a sympathetic ear.

A couple of volunteers once put together a photo slide show for a member's celebration of life service. Volunteers often have helped members with downsizing and moving to another home. On several occasions, AHA volunteers have recognized scams toward members and have been able to intervene and stop the problem.

Each member's expectations and interests vary. A village provides as much or as little as each member needs.

For many people, the social engagement that a village can offer has been one of the most satisfying aspects of village membership. Several members do not have family close by, so they gather together and

share Thanksgiving and Christmas dinner together. One AHA member, Jane, hit it off with a newer member, Mary Jayne, and invited Mary Jayne to join her long-standing book club. Another two members who met through AHA, Mary Ann and Sandy, are taking a trip together to Quebec.

Whether it's At Home in Alexandria, Mt. Vernon at Home, Arlington Neighborhood Village, Dupont Circle Village, Silver Spring Village, Capitol Hill Village or any of the many village organizations, this grass-roots movement evolved because we all want to live a full life as we age, and we want to support our friends who wish for the same. This is what makes a community. And, it's just the kind of thing a good neighbor would do.

*Cele Garrett is the executive director for At Home in Alexandria.*

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