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## Virtual Villages for Aging in Place

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## **Virtual Villages for Aging in Place**

by

Edward F. Ansello, Ph.D.

Just before the turn of this century a group of older residents of Beacon Hill in Boston found an answer to how they would stay active and meaningfully engaged in their own neighborhoods as they aged. They wanted to continue to direct their own lives and sought to create some type of multi-focus entity that addressed the various aspects of community living.

They decided to form a grassroots organization of their neighbors for mutual benefit, one that encompassed a broad area that included not only Beacon Hill but also nearby Back Bay, the North End, and the South End of downtown Boston. It would be not for profit, have an executive director, and would seek and train volunteers to help with driving, administration, community outreach, technology assistance, friendly visits, and more. Services would help members to meet their needs, whether these were for personal growth through cultural arts and classes, managing their households, obtaining minor repairs in their homes, getting transportation, or referral to a good health care provider.

They established Beacon Hill Village and enrolled their initial members in January 2002, the first Village in what has grown into a small scale national movement. The Village concept has gained much attention as a model for aging in place. Villages are community-based, self-governing, not for profit organizations whose members pay an annual fee, from several hundred dollars to a thousand or more, to obtain access to an array of services that may assist them to maintain their physical health, keep up their property, manage their resources, continue to grow intellectually and engage socially. In short, to remain part of the community in their homes.

Villages are virtual constructs that are superimposed over a fairly defined geographic area, such as a group of buildings, neighborhoods, or a district of several miles. Mount Vernon At Home in Virginia covers 14 square miles in Fairfax County. In more densely populated areas the Village may define a smaller geography or reach vertically through high rises.

There are currently about 125 Villages across the country, with about 100 in development, including about 40 either operating or in development in the Washington, DC area, which saw its first, the Capitol Hill Village, begin just in 2007. There are 13 Villages in Virginia, either open or in development. You can see where Villages operate by visiting the Village to Village Network at [www.vtvnetwork.org](http://www.vtvnetwork.org).

Services can include social, recreational, cultural, and educational programs; technology classes; financial and medical planning; care management; information and referral to vetted providers, from dry cleaners to plumbers to health care; temporary house sitting, and more. For example, Foggy Bottom West End Village has a quick response team of trained volunteers for people with special needs.

How viable is the Village model? In March 2014 the University of Maryland School of Social Work released the findings from its two-phase national survey of Villages. Researchers Amanda Lehning, Joan Davitt, Andrew Scharlach, and Emily Greenfield sought to investigate sustainability and inclusiveness. Could they maintain operations after the initial burst of enthusiasm? Were there obstacles in common that each Village likely faced? To answer these and other questions the research team noted changes in membership size and funding over 2011-2013, challenges to sustainability, and strategies to overcome these challenges, such as recruitment and marketing. The report is available at [www.agingandcommunity.org/publications](http://www.agingandcommunity.org/publications).

The University of Maryland researchers conducted their initial survey during January-June 2012, with a second wave during June-September 2013. The initial survey was of those Villages operating in the beginning of 2012 that self-identified as a Village and were providing services to members; 69 of 80 villages (86%) responded. The follow-up wave examined changes in sustainability indicators from 2012 to 2013 and explored challenges to sustainability, as well as recruitment efforts to obtain more diverse membership; 58 of the 69 (84%) responded.

They found that the Village concept was catching on. The average number of members in a Village grew from 134 in 2012 to 155 in 2013. Overall, about 75% of the Villages had membership increases. Of 54 Villages that provided financial data, total annual budgets increased from 2011 to 2012, from an average of \$118, 671 to \$134, 567 a year. These figures are somewhat misleading, however, being skewed by a few well-endowed Villages; the majority of all Villages had modest annual budgets under \$100,000.

Lehning and colleagues found that confidence in sustainability remained fairly high on average during the two phases of surveys, but individual Villages had substantial changes up or down, principally due to the success or failure of funding efforts and recruitment of new members. But other factors also affected confidence in continuity. Respondents identified levels of community awareness of the Village's offerings, community's needs for its services, and degree of self-identification with the Village's membership (such as seeing oneself as younger or healthier than the members or misperceiving that Villages are only for the very old and frail) as important contributors to the Village's sustainability. Pointedly, the report states that some "Villages had less confidence in sustainability because of the aging of their membership and their difficulty recruiting younger members."

How will Villages grow and continue? The majority (60%) see funding as the most important contributor to their future existence. Obtaining enough volunteers to provide services, staffing, and offering services adequate to members' changing needs were far down the list of challenges. Questions in the surveys about strategies for sustainability revealed an important obstacle: the principal way Villages recruit new members is through "word of mouth." For some Villages, this tends to suppress recruitment of more men and minorities, since most Village members are white females. New members tend to reflect current members, continuing the same racial, ethnic, gender, age, and income profiles. Eager for more diversity within their membership, over seven in 10 Villages offered discounted membership fees in 2012 and 2013, but, ironically, this feature may further jeopardize the sustainability of Villages that are precarious financially.

Respondents identified recruiting more males and offering more male-centric activities as potential strategies for growth, along with making the surrounding community more aware of the range of services and opportunities that the Village has to offer. Many Villages now have the option for non-Village members to sign up for the Village's social and cultural events, like museum and travel tours, as a way of introducing people to who Village members are and what opportunities the Village can offer.

At a dozen years in, the Village concept has demonstrated its worth. It seems to adapt to local characteristics, while maintaining its essential grassroots, self-governing core. Doubtless there will be ups and downs for individual Villages, but the Village model provides a considerable option for remaining in one's home.