

# LEVERAGING COMMUNITY STRENGTHS for Healthy Aging through Villages and Social Work



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Importance of human relationships. Dignity and worth of the person. Service. Social justice.

Social workers have opportunities to enact these core values of the profession (National Association of Social Workers, n.d.) every day when working with Villages.

Originating in Boston in the early 2000s, Villages promote aging in place by building a sense of community among residents who connect and share resources and services to remain independent and engaged in their existing neighborhoods (Graham & Guzman, 2022). Based on principles of reciprocity and community building, Villages encourage empowerment, social justice, and inclusivity, contributing to healthy aging and community age-friendliness. Read on for three examples.

## **BENJAMIN NGUYEN: MEANINGFUL CONNECTIONS AT WESTSIDE PACIFIC VILLAGES**

I set out on a Wednesday afternoon for a special meeting for Marketing and Admissions

Professionals for Seniors (MAPS). The invitation to the MAPS meeting came through a connection facilitated by one of our NASW CA Region H administrators and a neighbor who volunteered for our local Westside Pacific Villages (WPV, 2020). This individual wanted to connect WPV (and me) to another neighbor who had been a long-term caregiver for her mother. She shared her journey of becoming a certified practitioner for Montessori for dementia, disability, and aging, and an administrator for a senior residential care facility. We bonded over our mutual enthusiasm for community age-friendliness as we connected with other professionals within the continuum of care for aging. It was clear that she would be an invaluable resource for WPV members, especially those navigating caregiving and dementia.

After the MAPS meeting, I received an urgent call about our company's van, which is part of a federal transportation service for older adults. The van had a maintenance issue and was blocking a member's

driveway. Unable to coordinate with the repair shop that evening, I discovered the member's home was a few blocks away from me, allowing me to walk over early and address the issue the next morning. While overseeing maintenance and towing, the member and I bonded over shared experiences in Los Angeles, discussing urban challenges and the culture of loneliness in the city. Our conversation extended to solutions like the recently launched Metro Micro ride-sharing service as well as our Village's friendly visits and call-a-neighbor programs.

Unexpectedly, the topic shifted to oral health, with the member expressing embarrassment over her smile due to tooth decay. She shared with me her challenges with getting dental impressions for restoration—the traditional molding process was too harsh. I connected her with a local prosthodontist who uses innovative 3D printing and laser scanning technology, offering solutions tailored to late-life dental needs. In that moment, sitting on the

porch, our conversation encapsulated the essence of community and collaboration. It was a reminder that genuine connections and shared experiences are the bedrock of any Village, as they foster a sense of belonging and support for all its members. I reflected on my week at WPV and felt inspired, empowered, and grounded by the organic and normalized conversations about aging—allowing the community to embrace, create space for, and navigate the challenges and opportunities that come with living longer.

## **EMILY GREENFIELD: BEYOND A SOCIAL PLANNING MODEL FOR AGE-FRIENDLINESS IN GLEN ROCK NEIGHBORHOOD NETWORK**

The sun was shining on the day I received the call. I was at a local playground with my daughter, and there on the phone was the community partner who had been spearheading efforts for years to start up Villages in Bergen County, New Jersey, where we both live. "They want to start a Village in Glen Rock," she told me. My heart skipped a beat.

As a resident of Glen Rock, a community gerontologist, and an academic social worker, I immediately understood what an exciting development this was for my borough, our county, and our state. For years, I have been deeply involved with the development of age-friendly community (AFC) initiatives. As part of an action research project, I have both studied and supported dozens of community leaders in New Jersey in their efforts to make place-based communities more inclusive and supportive of residents as they age. Although AFC initiatives are generally understood as a social planning model (community assessments, action plans, implementation, monitoring), those involved have come to understand the inherently relational nature of this work, which is consistent with social work's long-standing championing of community practice.

Villages are a community model that uniquely and fundamentally centers a relational approach to improving communities for long and healthy lives. At their core, Villages engage residents and community leaders to work together and support each other in new and more intentional ways; leverage existing community assets while cultivating additional resources; and creatively address problems in the here and now while also cocreating a brighter future. For Villages, all of this work is in service to helping

people live their best lives as they age—not just *in* community, but *through* community.

Going on two years—and hopefully many more to come—I have had the joy and privilege of being part of a group of neighbors working toward the development of our Village—one phone call, email, flyer, web page, handbook paragraph, and meeting at a time. We do it for our aging selves, for each other, for our town that we care deeply about, and for a growing number of community leaders in surrounding towns who are asking “What’s going on in Glen Rock?” They, too, understand the potentially transformative power of Villages. In the words of Margaret Mead, “Never underestimate the power of a small group of committed people to change the world. In fact, it is the only thing that ever has.”

If you are a social worker or community member who wants to get involved with your local Village or even learn how to start a Village in your neighborhood, you can check out the national Village to Village Network (n.d.) for more information and resources to get started.

#### **NATALIE POPE: SERVICE WITH INTENTIONAL RELATIONSHIP BUILDING AND COMMUNITY**

I am a newcomer to Villages. While I have been aware of the Village movement through prior

work with AFC efforts, I have only recently had the opportunity to work directly with Villages as part of a grant-funded project, Engaging Villages as Key Partners for Healthy Aging Research (Rutgers University School of Social Work, 2023), which seeks to launch a national conversation among Villages on how to study their ability to create healthy aging outcomes.

In this professional capacity, I have the opportunity to interweave macro and micro social work practice. An emergent role for me in this project has been providing Village members who are part of our learning-action advisory committee with technology support to ensure all members are able to fully engage with the work we are doing together. This one-on-one support has taken the forms of structured tutorials of our collaborative platform, exploring accessibility issues specific to individual members, and repeat phone calls as members work to navigate the platform in real time.

Although I have always loved doing technology trainings across my personal and professional roles—from walking my father through his first MailChimp email for his veteran’s community group to providing multiday trainings on association management software—the opportunity to work directly with Village members has been especially rewarding. These training

sessions have become an opportunity for the interpersonal relationship building that comes from taking the time to be with and listen to others and serve them. It is through these interactions that I have glimpsed the sense of the intertwined aspects of service and community that characterize Villages.

My introduction to Villages has highlighted the importance of human relationships across social work practice, specifically revealing their dynamism as both a tool to facilitate social change and a desired outcome of social practice. This is similar to the dual nature of communities in community practice, which serve as both the “vehicle and the target of change,” to quote Jack Rothman. Through this project, I am no longer just working to facilitate strategic relationships between individuals and organizations with the goal of advancing social change; rather, similar to how I suspect Villages are designed to build community through reciprocity, I have developed relationships of my own in practice and service with others.

#### **SOCIAL WORKERS, SOCIAL ACTION, AND THE VILLAGE MOVEMENT**

At their core, Villages are a social movement reminiscent of the historical roots of social work and the settlement movement. Villages are a response to rapid aging of population and the gaps within

our society in supporting longer lives. Social workers can get involved with Villages in many ways. They can take roles in leadership or operations, as local community members, or in coordination efforts—offering a blend of the micro, macro, and mezzo social work opportunities along with a deep commitment to social work values. We hope you can experience the power of a Village in your community.

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## REFERENCES

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## Upcoming Live SPS Webinars

### **How Social Workers can use Relational Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) Therapy for the Treatment of Complex Trauma**

Monday, October 28, 2024 (1 – 2:30 pm ET)

Registration: [naswinstitute.inreachce.com/Details/Information/4dba7dda-bc06-4bd8-aaa7-3ef03605997d](https://naswinstitute.inreachce.com/Details/Information/4dba7dda-bc06-4bd8-aaa7-3ef03605997d)

Presenter: Deany Laliotis, LICSW, LCSW-C

CEs: 1.5 Clinical Social Work contact hours

EMDR therapy has evolved into a comprehensive approach that treats problems of daily living that stem from low self-esteem, relationship difficulties and problems with self-regulation, all byproducts of complex trauma. In this workshop, you'll learn how EMDR can be used as a relational approach treat complex developmental trauma, not just by targeting painful memories, but by creating the conditions that make it possible for the client to "go there."

### **Clinical Aspects of Dementia and the Role of the Social Worker in the Care for Persons Living with Dementia and their Families**

Friday, November 8, 2024 (1- 2 pm ET)

Registration: [naswinstitute.inreachce.com/Details/Information/37584cce-ef5e-41b0-b636-ccfa9ec7f451](https://naswinstitute.inreachce.com/Details/Information/37584cce-ef5e-41b0-b636-ccfa9ec7f451)

Presenter: María P. Aranda, PhD, MSW, MPA, LCSW

CEs: 1 Clinical Social Work contact hour

This webinar provides information on best practice approaches to dementia care in the US. Specifically, content will include the clinical aspects of dementia, the care needs of persons living with dementia and their families, and the role of social work in the provision of care.