

WAVE Mutual Support Zoom Session: Low-Fee and No-Fee Villages—Thriving on Small Budgets

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Wyngate & Maplewood
Neighbors Helping Neighbors
Building a Supportive Community Together

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Wyngate & Maplewood Neighbors Helping Neighbors Village

Village profile

1. Grassroots: organized & operated by residents of our communities
2. Service area: 2,400+ single-family dwellings in Bethesda near NIH
3. Maryland-incorporated (2015) and IRS-certified 501(c)(3)*
(* this is very important for reasons to be described later)
4. All volunteer: 62 volunteers in total
5. Governed by a Board & Steering Committee (no paid staff)
6. No-fee (non-membership)

7. Neighborly assistance & social activities to all adults (we are intergenerational) that we provide in our communities include:

- Assistance that is occasional, non-emergency, doesn't require a professional license, and doesn't take jobs away from neighborhood teenagers (i.e., snow shoveling; dog walking; lawn mowing, etc.)
- Rides (e.g., medical app'ts), computer and simple household challenges, etc.
- Shared-interest groups that meet regularly (book, walking, others)
- Occasional community-wide presentations & events

What led us to take this approach?

1. Most of Organizing Committee's (OC) members were retired so not looking for "another job" or a Village model that would be burdensome, stressful to manage, or have deadlines.
2. The OC believed that a simpler Village model would be easier to pass on to the next generation and help it survive in the long run.
3. The OC believed being "no-fee" would:
 - a. Solicit requests for services from neighbors who would be deterred by having to pay a membership fee.
 - b. Free us from being obligated to provide assistance when our volunteers were unavailable to help. (We tell requesters that we can't guarantee that a volunteer will be available to provide assistance.)

- c. Free us from feeling obligated to provide a steady stream of “home-grown” initiatives and social presentations and events
- 4. The OC believed that minimizing operating costs would enable us to sustain the Village regardless of gifts or grants that we might or might not receive, and spare us from the time, energy, and anxiety of fundraising, as well as managing individual’s memberships (e.g., expirations, renewal reminders, etc.)

How do we continue to deliver on our purpose and sustain ourselves without the dependable revenue stream that substantial membership dues can offer?

- 1. Soliciting, coordinating, and providing volunteer assistance costs nothing.
- 2. Forming & supporting shared-interest groups costs nothing. “Home-grown” Zoom presentations, which tend to be monthly, cost nothing.
- 3. Some initiatives and other Village’s Zoom presentations cost nothing.
 - a. At January’s WAVE meeting, we learned of 3 good no-cost initiatives: Tech Coaching, Stronger Memory, and Finishing Strong. We’re now learning more & recruiting volunteers to launch these programs in our communities.
 - b. We direct neighbors to WAVE’s calendar to find other Village’s free Zoom presentations.

4. We use our communities' free neighborhood listservs to publicize Village information.
5. We don't purchase insurance or background checks (see **"Insurance"** below).

What successes and challenges can we point to?

1. Successes

- a. We're in our 8th year of operation
- b. 500+ requests have been fulfilled to date (~ 1/3 rides)
- c. Nearly all requests have been fulfilled
- d. Leadership has remained stable, non-stressed, and collegial
- e. We've retained our goodwill in the community

2. Challenges

- a. Like most Villages - recruiting next-generation leaders, we're just starting to make progress
- b. Decentralizing administrative tasks, we're just starting to make progress
- c. We ask the community to suggest "home-grown" initiatives and social events, but receive few.
- d. When we receive viable suggestions, we struggle to recruit someone to lead them.

- e. We continue to believe that we are receiving fewer requests for service than we think should be generated from a service area with our population.

3. Observations

- a. We know our model works.
- b. We have benefited from technology, but know that it's still better to talk with people directly both in making them feel comfortable asking for help and in recruiting them to help run the Village.
- c. Although our Village is intergenerational (i.e., all adults may participate), most requests for assistance come from elderly residents who live alone.
- d. We are in an upper middle-class community. Most residents can afford professional services (e.g., Uber, PeaPod, Geek Squad, etc). Currently, there doesn't seem to be much need for Village assistance, but perhaps there is and we're just unaware of it. Nonetheless, having a support system in place that doesn't cost much allows us to continue to evolve and provide more assistance if it's ever needed.
- e. During the pandemic many neighbors were able to afford and understand how to shop online, attend Tele-health visits, and have food deliveries made; they did not seek these services from our Village. That was just as well, because during the pandemic most of our volunteers were reluctant to interact with clients in these ways. Our mission will probably be shifting more toward activities that build a sense of community and address social isolation.

- f. Being 501(c)(3)-certified enables us to offer volunteer opportunities to public school students that help them satisfy their Student Service Learning requirement. These opportunities don't involve assisting residents, but rather participating in group activities that support our communities or the Village itself.

What alternative revenue sources have we identified?

1. Since 2015, we've received a total of \$5,000 from, in order of importance:
 - a. Unsolicited check donations by neighbors
 - b. 2 successful grant applications to the Suburban Hospital-Village Alliance
 - c. An unsolicited grant from the Misbah & Hind Ahad Fund
2. Village brochures were paid for with grant money and distributed door-to-door by volunteers, and, in addition to reaching off-the-grid residents, generated check donations by neighbors.
3. We occasionally have a collection jar at live social events. (We say, "We're no-fee, but we have expenses.")
4. Although our webpage has a link to donate via our free PayPal account, it has attracted no donations.

What technology, efficiencies and collaborations have we identified to limit our expenses?

Technology

Google Applications are central to Village communications: free

Gmail: dedicated email address for Village

- Used to receive emailed requests for assistance & residents' questions

- Used to publicize activities via contacts & community listservs

- Used to conduct administrative tasks

Voice: dedicated phone number for Village

- Used to receive phoned-in requests for assistance & residents' questions. Missed calls are saved in voicemail and a transcription arrives in our linked Gmail inbox.

- Used to rotate responsibility for receiving phoned-in requests for assistance & residents' questions

- Shared phone number: can be answered by up to 6 designated volunteer coordinators who rotate this responsibility monthly

Drive: 15 GB cloud storage dedicated to Village

- Free word processing & spreadsheet applications

- Used to create & share administrative records across Board, Steering Committee, and other contributors

- Used to create & maintain the Village's webpage at no cost.

- Note: We do pay \$47/ yr for our domain name

- "wnhn.org" -- users are seamlessly redirected to the webpage on our Google Drive.

Lotsa Helping Hands (LOHH) Application: free

1. LOHH is the app we use to alert volunteers to assistance requests and to enable them to independently sign up to provide the assistance.
2. The on-duty volunteer coordinator adds the details of the request to LOHH's online scheduling calendar that sends an email alert to all our volunteers.
3. Volunteers independently access the calendar to learn the details of the assistance request and sign-up to provide the assistance.
4. Once a volunteer has signed-up to provide the assistance, its calendar entry changes color to alert other volunteers that the request is closed and an email is sent to our Gmail inbox to alert the volunteer coordinator.

Zoom: 100 may attend a 40-minute session for free

1. Used for administrative meetings & presentations to community
2. A Zoom account enabling greater attendance and longer sessions costs \$150/year with potentially a \$75 nonprofit discount. We have received grant money for this.

Collaborations

Community Citizens Association

Is an established dues-collecting organization

Our Village benefits same population, great investment

Paid our start-up fees: Maryland incorporation

IRS 501(c)(3) certification

Co-hosts/cost-shares many community social events

Insurance

IRS 501(c)(3) certification is:

- required for individual donations to be tax deductible
- required by organizations offering grants
- required for limited liability of volunteers & the Village

Our Village may not have launched were it not for: (1) what we interpret to be sufficient statutory protections for our volunteers and the Village itself as a result of our 501(c)(3) certification, (2) the exercise of due diligence, and (3) the low risk of what we do.

1. Statutory protections

- We do not purchase insurance.
- The Federal 1997 Volunteer Protection Act (VPA) provides immunity and limited liability protections to 501(c)(3) volunteers (including volunteer directors, officers, and trustees) acting on behalf of the Village for harm caused by non-negligent acts or omissions. However, these protections exclude the operation of motor vehicles.
- The 2013 Maryland Volunteer Service Act provides immunity and limited liability protection to 501(c)(3) volunteers acting on behalf of the Village for harm caused by non-negligent operation of a motor vehicle.
- More information regarding these protections is available upon request. Also, see the NOTE below.

2. Exercise of due diligence

- We do not provide assistance if it's:
 - deemed high-risk
 - normally requires a professional license (electric, plumbing, etc)
 - involves minors
- We require our volunteers to complete an agreement to maintain confidentiality, eschew personal gain, accept risk, and release the Village from liability.
- We verify drivers' licenses (i.e., adopt Maryland's standard for being able to drive)
- We notify (and hand off to) the County's Adult Protective Services Division any health or safety situations that concern us
- We don't purchase background checks, but do monitor the Sex Offender Registry.
- Our policy is to not make "recommendations" (e.g., of a particular vendor or particular course of action to take). We understand there is a legal distinction between making "recommendations" and making "suggestions" with the former legally exposing the Village and the latter not.

3. Low risk We deem the assistance we agree to provide and the social activities we choose to host to be low-risk. A well-placed source told me s/he was unaware of any legal action ever being taken against a Village, here or elsewhere.

NOTE: Both a lawyer that our Steering Committee consulted with, and the lay interpretations of Steering Committee members who have looked into this, have convinced us that our officers and volunteers are adequately protected from liability concerns. However, we have also heard from some individuals who strongly dispute this. We do not understand or agree with their

arguments, but we would welcome a dialog with anyone who believes we are not as protected as we believe we are.