

# Friendship Bench DC Volunteer Information Packet

October 2023



GRANDPARENTS  
for Mental Health



# Greetings!

Thank you for your interest in Friendship Bench DC, a program of DC Grandparents for Mental Health, supported by HelpAge USA!

Through Friendship Bench DC, older people have the opportunity to join together and be trained to provide safe spaces and a sense of belonging in our community. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, people of all ages are struggling with difficult thoughts and feelings. Often, a listening ear is all they need to feel better.

We know that older people are particularly good at providing that listening ear.

Friendship Bench DC is modeled on the Friendship Bench pioneered in Zimbabwe, which equips community health workers, more fondly called “grandmothers” or “ambuya utanos,” to provide care for individuals experiencing depression or anxiety, using culturally appropriate screening tools and talk therapy sessions. Since 2016, more than 200,000 people in six countries have received treatment through the Friendship Bench, with 78% showing improvement.

Training for Friendship Bench DC will begin in mid-September and be conducted via Zoom on Wednesdays and Fridays from 10am to noon. Training sessions will be taught by Dr. Dixon Chibanda, who created the Friendship Bench in Zimbabwe. In October, we plan to have some sessions in person when Dixon is in DC.

Over the course of 10 weeks, Friendship Bench DC volunteers will learn, with others, how to deeply listen and empathize; how to detect red flags and make referrals to professional care if needed; and the basics of talk therapy, which is how to help people solve their own problems.

After training is complete, volunteers will be certified to serve on a Friendship Bench. The first benches will be set up in January 2024 in safe community spaces throughout DC .

Studies have shown that older people who serve on a Friendship Bench have a greater sense of purpose in their lives and connection to the community.

Thank you again for your interest, and we hope you will join us.



*Cindy Cox-Roman*

*President and CEO, HelpAge USA*

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# About Us

HelpAge Global Network



## HelpAge USA

- 📍 Washington, DC, USA
- 🌐 [helpageusa.org](http://helpageusa.org)
- ✉ [info@helpageusa.org](mailto:info@helpageusa.org)
- 🏆 Established: 2009
- 👥 Team size: 1-10

### What we do:

- **Research and Thought Leadership:** We identify data gaps and conduct research to build knowledge and insight into issues facing older people.
- **Advocacy:** We advocate for the well-being and inclusion of older people with policymakers and other stakeholders and challenge common stereotypes about older people and ageism.
- **Program Implementation:** We implement programs that address the needs of older people and support their role as contributors within their communities—globally and in the U.S.

### A thought from us:

Whether it's working with our DC Grandparents for Mental Health in the U.S. or supporting older Ukrainian refugees, we are committed to inclusivity and raising the voices of older people, challenging common myths, and helping them come together to create real change.

## About DC Grandparents for Mental Health

DC Grandparents for Mental Health, a program of the nonprofit HelpAge USA, is a movement by adults 60+ years of age in Washington, DC, united in promoting mental health through peer-to-peer and intergenerational conversations and interventions. Building on the success of DC Grandparents Against COVID-19, the goal is to provide mental health support to community members of all ages from trusted older people.

Recognizing the lack of resources and other barriers to mental health care, the older people behind DC Grandparents for Mental Health are working to fill some of these gaps with intergenerational activities and a new pilot initiative called Friendship Bench DC, which allows people to confidentially share their story with an older person and know they will receive empathy, understanding, and respect.

## Contact Us!

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- ☎ 202-709-8442
- 🔗 [helpageusa.org/dc-grandparents](http://helpageusa.org/dc-grandparents)

If you want to learn more about Friendship Bench Zimbabwe, visit their [website](http://friendshipbenchzimbabwe.org) at [friendshipbenchzimbabwe.org](http://friendshipbenchzimbabwe.org), listen to Dr. Dixon Chibanda's [TED Talk](#), and see their [JAMA RCT](#).

# What to Expect

## What Makes Someone a Good Fit to Volunteer for Friendship Bench DC?

- A desire to support others through active listening and expressed empathy
- An attitude of unconditional positive regard for others and belief that you're doing "work of the heart"
- An ability to hold what is shared and other people's stories in confidence
- Willingness to use a smart phone to send/receive communications

## Time Commitment

- Attend training sessions twice a week between September and December 2023 (4 hours per week)
- Serve on a Friendship Bench at least two days each month in a safe location near you, such as a church, senior wellness center, library, or other community space, starting January 2024

## Benefits

- Help people struggling with anxiety and depression
- Learn how to guide others through a series of steps toward enhanced mental well-being through connection and empathy, in a non-judgmental space
- Become part of a group of older people with a shared purpose
- Gain a greater connection to the community and the opportunity to make a difference
- Receive a reimbursement for transportation and other expenses incurred by volunteers (as permitted by law) to attend in-person training sessions and for each day of service on a Friendship Bench

## Our Approach: About Problem-Solving Therapy

Problem-solving therapy is an evidence-based, cognitive-behavioral intervention used to help people cope with stressful life experiences, build resilience, and improve how they function in various areas of their lives, be it personal, professional, or social.

Problem-solving therapy works by teaching people skills to help them take a more active role in their lives, take more initiative, and use whatever influence they have to effectively make decisions and achieve their goals. By using this treatment approach with one specific problem, people learn to apply it to any other problem that come up, empowering them to face difficulties more independently.



Talk therapy is a way to offload your problems, sort through issues, find ways to cope, and to be heard and supported in a non-judgmental way. It's perfect for everybody, and there is no "one reason" that people need to seek mental and emotional support.

## What We Don't Do

- Give answers. We believe people know themselves better than anyone and their solutions are uniquely individual.
- Give advice or solve problems. Friendship Bench DC volunteers are here to guide and support others in the process of exploring solutions.
- Provide medical advice or treatment. Friendship Bench DC volunteers are trained laypeople and will work with mental health providers to refer people to higher levels of care if needed.

# Training Overview

## Sessions and Topics

Training sessions will be held over the course of 10 weeks starting in September 2023 and ending in December. All training is FREE.

We follow a blended model, which includes face-to-face and online training provided by Dr. Dixon Chibanda, the founder of Friendship Bench Zimbabwe. The actual training focuses on the topics below.

- History of the Bench
- Psychoeducation
- Basic counseling skills
- Mental health literacy
- Screening
- Problem-solving therapy
- How to conduct sessions and when to refer
- Use of tools and resources
- Self-care and supervision

## Schedule

Sessions will be held on the following days from 10am–12pm ET. Note: Some October dates may change to allow for in-person training sessions (with a Zoom option for those who cannot attend in person).

- Wednesday, Sept. 13
- Friday, Sept. 15
- Wednesday, Sept. 20
- Friday, Sept. 22
- Wednesday, Sept. 27
- Friday, Sept. 29
- Wednesday, Oct. 4
- Wednesday, Oct. 11
- Friday, Oct. 13
- Wednesday, Oct. 18
- Friday, Oct. 20
- Wednesday, Oct. 25
- Friday, Oct. 27
- Wednesday, Nov. 1
- Friday, Nov. 3
- Wednesday, Nov. 8
- Wednesday, Nov. 15
- Friday, Nov. 17
- Wednesday, Nov. 29
- Friday, Dec. 1

# FAQs

## **Q: What is Friendship Bench DC?**

A: Friendship Bench DC provides a way for people of all ages to confidentially share their story with an older person and know they will receive empathy, respect, and understanding. Friendship Benches will be placed in safe community spaces throughout Washington, DC.

## **Q: Why is the Friendship Bench needed?**

A: There is a mental health crisis among people of all ages and a lack of resources and other barriers to care. The older people behind DC Grandparents for Mental Health and Friendship Bench DC want to stop the secrecy and stigma around mental health and help others feel less alone. By joining together, they know they can have a positive impact and be part of the solution.

## **Q: Why older people?**

A: Older people are custodians of wisdom and culture in our community. They are an untapped resource who can provide emotional support or simply a listening ear. Through Friendship Bench DC, older people can give others a sense of connection and personally gain a sense of purpose and fulfillment. The concept builds on the successful Friendship Bench model pioneered in Zimbabwe.

## **Q: How will Friendship Bench DC volunteers prepare themselves to support others?**

A: Friendship Bench DC volunteers are participating in evidence-based training by mental health professionals to learn how to effectively listen and empathize with people who are struggling with difficult thoughts and feelings. Successful programs like Friendship Bench Zimbabwe show that laypeople can be trained to help prevent anxiety and depression from spiraling into something worse. During training, a referral pathway is established for cases which are considered "red flags" where a higher level of care is needed. Volunteers who experience any emotional distress when supporting others will have access to free mental health counseling.

## **Q: Who is leading Friendship Bench DC?**

A: A group of older volunteers, called DC Grandparents for Mental Health. Previously, they joined together to successfully encourage COVID-19 vaccination through the HelpAge USA program DC Grandparents Against COVID-19. They have found joy in working together and making a difference.



**Q: What organizations support Friendship Bench DC?**

A: Friendship Bench DC and DC Grandparents for Mental Health are supported by HelpAge USA, a nonprofit that promotes older people's well-being and self-advocacy, in partnership with the Black Coalition for Health and the Rodham Institute.

**Q: Do you need to be a grandparent to volunteer?**

A: No, but volunteers do need to be 60+ years of age. Many older people are like a grandparent to others and can play an influential role in their lives.

**Q: What age groups will be supported by Friendship Bench DC?**

A: People of all ages, from younger to older, will be able to turn to Friendship Bench DC to tell their story. Initially the focus will be on serving adults over 21 years of age, including older people who remain isolated or in need of support.

**Q: How will we know if Friendship Bench DC is successful?**

A: A survey will help determine: 1) how many people who talk to a Friendship Bench DC volunteer feel an improvement in their well-being; and 2) how many of the older volunteers feel a greater sense of purpose and connection to the community.

**Questions?**

202-709-8442

[dcgrandparents@gmail.com](mailto:dcgrandparents@gmail.com)

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