

Friendship Bench DC Project Playbook

HelpAge
USA

*Supporting
an aging world*

GRANDPARENTS
for Mental Health



Table of Contents

3	About Us
4	Working With Our Host Partners
5	Promoting Friendship Bench DC at Host Locations
6	What Happens When Someone Schedules a Session?
7	Screening and Assessment
8	About Our Friendship Bench DC Volunteers
9	FAQs
11	Thank You to Our Sponsors

About Us

HelpAge Global Network



HelpAge USA

- 📍 Washington, DC, USA
- 🌐 helpageusa.org
- ✉ 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 program 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!

- ✉ dcgrandparents@gmail.com
- 📞 202-709-8730
- 🔗 helpageusa.org/dc-grandparents

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

Working With Our Host Partners

A Host Partner is a DC-based nonprofit organization that is interested in hosting the Friendship Bench DC service on its premises.

HelpAge USA will provide and place a bench on Host Partners' premises for free (unless there is an existing bench the Host Partner would prefer to use). There is also no charge for visitors to use the Friendship Bench DC service.

We ask that Host Partners:

- Identify an area on their premises to place the bench. It should be in a welcoming and safe space that allows for confidential conversation.
- Promote Friendship Bench DC as a free resource. (See sample on page 5).
- Refer people to Friendship Bench DC if they need a listening ear.
- Facilitate sign-ups so that people can sign up in advance to visit a Friendship Bench DC volunteer.
- Ensure a hospitable environment for the Friendship Bench DC volunteers (e.g., introduced to staff and viewed as a welcome resource).

HelpAge USA will:

- Assign volunteers to staff a bench at least one day a week.
- Provide Program Facilitator(s) who will work closely with each Host Partner and coordinate scheduling of dates/times when a Friendship Bench DC volunteer will be available and needed.
- Provide a Supervisor who is a DC-based mental health professional to help facilitate referrals, provide support to Friendship Bench DC volunteers, and oversee the integrity of the program.
- Maintain confidentiality among all parties. The only time a volunteer will share anything from the bench is if someone is at risk of harming themselves or others, or is in need of specialist care such as hospitalization and/or medication.
- Ensure a process of referrals for cases that need a higher level of care.
- Help provide a hospitable environment for Friendship Bench DC visitors (e.g., books to read while waiting, small signs with affirmations, etc.).

Promoting Friendship Bench DC at Host Locations

Sample promotional literature



Friendship Bench DC offers a safe and supportive environment for all who need to connect, be heard, and feel a sense of belonging.

Friendship Bench DC volunteers are older people who have been specifically trained to listen and support people struggling with difficult thoughts and feelings. They know life can be tough and want to help others feel less alone.

**Everybody has a story.
We're here to listen.**

There will be a Friendship Bench DC volunteer at this location every Tuesday from 1–5pm.

**Sign up now to
schedule a free in-
person visit.**

First visits are usually 45–60 minutes. Sign up to meet with a Friendship Bench DC volunteer and find a listening ear.

What Happens When Someone Schedules a Session?

In booking a Friendship Bench DC session, a Program Facilitator will ask visitors to read and agree to the following information:

- Everything you say will be between you and the Friendship Bench DC volunteer. The only exception is if you are at risk of harming yourself or others, or are in need of specialist care such as hospitalization and/or medication.
- Friendship Bench DC volunteers are not licensed medical or mental health professionals and are acting only in a supportive capacity.
- Our service is free for visitors. As such, we can deny, limit, or terminate your access to our services for any reason.
- You are responsible for your decisions and their consequences. We can't guarantee the outcomes or results of using the Friendship Bench DC service.
- You understand and agree that in no event will Friendship Bench DC and its sponsoring organization, HelpAge USA; its host organization; or its officers, directors, employees, and volunteers be liable if you experience emotional distress or other harm while using the Friendship Bench DC service.
- You agree to the collection of data and understand how it will be used.

Visitors will be asked for their name, age, phone number, and gender identification. If someone does not wish to provide any of this information, they have the option to do so, although they will be asked for a pseudonym.

A Program Facilitator will also ask them to complete a mental health screening questionnaire before their first visit and at follow-up visits to help assess level of risk, inform the support provided, and track any data/improvements over time.

Screening and Assessment

(TO BE ADMINISTERED BY A PROGRAM FACILITATOR)

A person who is feeling hopeless and helpless might not feel like there is a solution to their problems, which means it is critical to assess risk. At Friendship Bench DC, a Program Facilitator will use a screening tool (AKA, the PHQ-9), which can be used to help identify a visitor’s level of risk. It is important to note that a Program Facilitator will administer the PHQ-9 (and NOT the Friendship Bench DC volunteers).

Mental health screening tools are questionnaires where someone’s symptoms measure against a “cut-off” score. If they score on or above the cut-off, they are known as a red flag case. A red flag case is a situation where someone may be at risk of harming themselves or others, or is in need of specialist care such as hospitalization and/or medication. In these cases, the person may be reported and/or referred to a higher level of care.

For Friendship Bench DC, a Program Facilitator will ask visitors to complete an initial screening when they first reach out to schedule an appointment. All “red flag cases” will be immediately referred, while those who score below the cut-off will be able to make an appointment with a Friendship Bench DC volunteer.

PHQ-9				
Over the LAST 2 WEEKS, how often have you been <u>bothered</u> by any of the following problems?				
	Not at all	Several days	More than half the days	Nearly every day
1 Little interest or pleasure in doing things.	0	1	2	3
2 Feeling down, depressed, or hopeless.	0	1	2	3
3 Trouble falling or staying asleep, or sleeping too much.	0	1	2	3
4 Feeling tired or having little energy.	0	1	2	3
5 Poor appetite or overeating.	0	1	2	3
6 Feeling bad about yourself — or that you are a failure or have let yourself or your family down.	0	1	2	3
7 Trouble concentrating on things, such as reading the newspaper or watching television.	0	1	2	3
8 Moving or speaking so slowly that other people could have noticed? Or the opposite — being so fidgety or restless that you have been moving around a lot more than usual.	0	1	2	3
9 Thoughts that you would be better off dead or of hurting yourself in some way.	0	1	2	3

About Our Friendship Bench DC Volunteers

Friendship Bench DC volunteers are a group of older adults from historically Black neighborhoods in Washington, DC, who were previously members of our DC Grandparents Against COVID-19 movement.

Our group of older, Black volunteers have seen the mental health crisis in their communities and are determined to stop the secrecy and stigma and help others feel less alone. All volunteers have been trained to provide mental health support to community members 16+ years of age.



“So many people have mental illness, especially from COVID-19. We all need to join together. Everybody needs to know they are not alone.”
– Judy Brown, Friendship Bench DC Volunteer, Ward 8

FAQs

Q: What is Friendship Bench DC?

A: Friendship Bench DC provides a way for people 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: How can community organizations partner with Friendship Bench DC?

A: We welcome partnerships with local organizations (e.g., social services, faith-based communities, schools, etc.) who can offer Friendship Bench DC to the people they serve. The benches will be “staffed” one or more days each week with older volunteers who have been trained to listen and express empathy to those struggling with difficult thoughts and feelings.

Flyers will be available for each Host Partner to build awareness about Friendship Bench DC as a resource, conveying that the volunteers are not mental health professionals. Rather, they have been trained as laypeople to provide a confidential listening ear and sense of belonging in the community.

Visitors can sign up to meet with a Friendship Bench DC volunteer who is sitting at the bench or be referred by staff. One of the first questions the volunteer will ask is: “Tell me your story.” A set of screening questions will help determine if a visitor needs to be referred to a higher level of care. However, experience shows that most people just need a listening ear to feel better.

Q: What specific training is provided to Friendship Bench DC volunteers?

A: Friendship Bench DC volunteers have completed bi-weekly training sessions held over the course of 10 weeks. There are three levels of training that allow volunteers to provide different types of support to different groups.

- In Level One, volunteers learn the basics of mental health and listening skills.
- In Level Two, volunteers learn how to recognize symptoms and refer to a higher level of care if needed.
- In Level Three, volunteers learn how to provide basic problem-solving therapy to help people find workable solutions to the issues that are causing them to be anxious or depressed.

Training and supervision has been provided by Dr. Dixon Chibanda, who pioneered the Friendship Bench in Zimbabwe, in collaboration with local mental health professionals.

Q: How often does someone usually visit a Friendship Bench?

A: This depends on the individual, but evidence from the Friendship Bench in Zimbabwe shows that most people feel better after four to six sessions.

Q: Who will coordinate staffing of Friendship Bench DC at my organization?

A: A Program Facilitator will work with each organization to determine the optimal days/times to arrange for a Friendship Bench DC volunteer to be available.

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