

# Friendship Bench DC: FAQs for Community Partners



*“If we can help even one person, we would make a difference.”*

Judy Brown,  
Friendship Bench  
DC grandparent  
Resident of Ward 8

## What is Friendship Bench DC?

Friendship Bench DC provides a way for people of all ages to confidentially share their story with trained older people, known as “grandparents,” and know they will receive empathy and support. Benches are provided in safe spaces in partnership with community organizations.

The Friendship Bench model was started in Zimbabwe by a psychiatrist, Dr. Dixon Chibanda, to address a scarcity of community-based mental health resources. HelpAge USA launched Friendship Bench in DC in 2024.

## How can community organizations partner with Friendship Bench DC?

We welcome partnerships with local organizations (e.g., social services, faith-based communities, schools, etc.) that can provide Friendship Bench DC to the people they serve. Benches will be “staffed” one or more days each week with a Friendship Bench DC grandparent who has been trained to listen and express empathy to those struggling with difficult thoughts and feelings.

Flyers will be available for each partner to raise awareness about Friendship Bench DC as a resource. These flyers will convey that the grandparents 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.

People participating with each organization can be referred by staff to a Friendship Bench DC grandparent. A simple 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.

## What specific training is provided to Friendship Bench DC grandparents?

Friendship Bench DC grandparents participate in training sessions held over a 10-week period. These sessions are structured into three levels of training, enabling grandparents to offer various types of support to different groups.

- **Level One:** Grandparents acquire foundational knowledge of mental health and develop listening skills.
- **Level Two:** Grandparents learn how to recognize symptoms and refer, with the help of a licensed mental health professional, to a higher level of care if necessary.
- **Level Three:** Grandparents learn how to provide basic problem-solving therapy to assist people in identifying workable solutions to the issues that are causing them to experience anxiety and/or depression.

## How often can someone visit a Friendship Bench?

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

## Who will coordinate staffing of Friendship Bench DC at each organization?

Our Program Facilitator will work with each organization to determine the optimal days and times to schedule a Friendship Bench DC grandparent’s availability.

For more information, contact:  
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[helpageusa.org/friendshipbench/](https://helpageusa.org/friendshipbench/)