

Aging Happens: New program offers companionship for seniors

By Ellen Waldman

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Over the years, one of the most obvious needs I've seen is the deeply human need for more companionship and friendship. Many times, a couple has been married for what seems like their entire lives and then one of them is gone. Or, a person who has been single their whole lives loses the ability to continue their social life, due to any number of causes. We know that without a friendly voice, depression can set in and people give up on life. There are several programs I've mentioned in these columns to address this need, and now you can add one more.

Through ACCESS (Aging Community Coordinated Enterprises & Supportive Services) in Medford, the new Friendly Companion Program is now available. This program is administered by the "navigators" in the Senior Services Department. There is no fee for this, since the program is totally supported by the generosity of the community and grants.

Nicki Bell is the ACCESS lead senior navigator in Medford, whose role it is to oversee, manage and train volunteers and participants. She explained how this program supports those who call in and request more information and companionship. Imagine having someone to talk with on the phone, hang out with and perhaps go for a nice walk. The double benefit is that everyone is a volunteer, and they get as much as they give from participating. Here is what Nicki shared with me:

Q: Why was this program created and what purpose does it serve?

A: ACCESS, since its inception in the early 1970s, has aimed to address the needs of the most vulnerable populations in our community, including seniors and people with disabilities who have low to moderate income. The purpose of the Friendly Companion Program is to train volunteer companions to simply be a friend to a person 60-plus years old, or people with disabilities. The volunteer will be providing the human touch of being a friend.

Q: How does this program fill the needs of older adults?

A: It provides the following:

- Companionship and socialization for older adults;
- Engages them in activities (such as board games, letter writing, watching movies, going for a walk);
- Relieves depression and loneliness; and
- Opportunities for companions to assess a situation to see if other needs may be present. (EW: To this I would add that many times, there is more going on than anyone is aware of. Having eyes on the scene helps address problems before they can become critical.)

Q: What have you learned that older adults are looking for?

A: One of the things we have learned that as people age, they often like to reminisce about their past, including stories of their childhood, family, careers and travels. The companion has an opportunity to

listen and spend time with the senior, making them feel valuable. (EW: In the new parlance, this is called "reminiscence therapy." We used to call it telling stories about your life. I like that better, actually.)

Q: How are those needing these services identified?

A: They come through word-of-mouth referrals from family members, case managers and gatekeepers in the community who are keeping their eyes open for isolated seniors. (EW: Again, it's those who are most alone who are most at risk for elder financial scams and abuse. This program can help avoid those scenarios.)

Q: How are volunteers identified, supervised and trained?

A: Identified: Volunteers generally have contacted the ACCESS Senior Navigator program to volunteer either through hearing about the program via our website, newsletter, social media and word of mouth.

Supervised: The program consists of an application process that includes: a personal interview, criminal background check, references, and one-on-one matching with a senior that shares their same interests.

Trained: An added benefit of the program is intensive training, shadowing and on-going professional in-service training and peer support.

From ACCESS: "Matchings are based on time, availability, geographic proximity and common interests. These people help to alleviate loneliness and isolation, improving quality of life and providing friendship."

The program is currently accepting new clients and looking for additional volunteers. To either volunteer or request a Companion, contact Nicki Bell at nicki@accesshelps.org or 541-774-4324, or call the ACCESS main office at 541-779-6691.

Honestly, we all hope that we will not be alone in our later years, and this program is one way to ensure that even if you're on your own, you don't need to be lonely. Friendship abounds!