

## Town of Newburgh Friends of Seniors Serve the Community

By Anita Manley

I would like to submit this essay for your 2010 Great Ideas in Aging Contest. I feel our program has made such a difference in our community. The cost is minimal - \$5,000 per year, helps our seniors remain in their homes and is easy to replicate anywhere there are willing volunteers who want to make their community better for seniors.

Three years ago, I happened to be discussing the difficulties families were experiencing caring for their aging relatives with my friend Vivian Carlin. Vivian is a marriage and family therapist who had been presenting seminars on caring for aging relatives and the one common theme among caregivers was the need for transportation to medical appointments and assistance with grocery shopping. Sadly, these seemed to be the main reason our seniors had to give up their independence, moving in with their families or to assisted living or skilled nursing facilities.

This issue hit home when my own mother became ill. She lived in Florida where you would expect there would be plenty of services, but that was not the case. When she needed someone to take her to a medical appointment or shopping, she contacted an agency which charged her \$15 a hour with a minimum of 3 hours - \$45 to have someone take her shopping or to the doctor! As she became more unable to care for herself, we arranged for her to move to an assisted living facility. She was not at all happy about losing her independence and soon slid into a depression. She passed away in 2006.

When I discussed the issues with Vivian, she showed me literature on "Livable Communities": towns, cities and small communities where volunteers drove seniors and the disabled to their appointments, perform simple chores, take them shopping or do their shopping for them and visit the homebound for an hour or two a week. These were truly life saving services.

Shortly thereafter, we began to read articles in our local newspapers about another local town which had created a similar project. We realized we could do this also. One of the first things we did was to ask our local seniors what services were most needed in the Town of Newburgh, where we have the largest senior population in our County. As we spoke to many of our residents, we realized that although the town provides a bus for seniors, transportation was not provided across town lines. If a doctor was located outside the town border (as most of our local doctors are), transportation was not provided. In addition, many of our seniors were physically unable to board the bus or carry their own groceries. Taxi rides were costing anywhere from \$10-25 round trip, a huge bite out of a monthly Social Security check.

Most importantly, we teamed up with Jewish Family Service of Orange County which runs the Friendly Visitor program among many other services, and we created a steering committee of interested town residents who have continued to support our efforts and advise us.

We spent more than a year organizing our project and reassuring our town officials that this was a worthwhile project that could be done at little cost to the town. Our Town Supervisor approved the project and installed a phone for us. We were able to obtain a grant from our state Assemblyman along

with some monies from the Office for the Aging for administration of the project by JFS. This year, we were given a donation by an anonymous donor who believed in our program and thanks to this contribution, we can continue to serve our town seniors.

In addition to being one of the co-founders and chairing the first steering committee for the Friends of Seniors, I have been serving as the project's volunteer coordinator since our inception. After publicizing our project through the local media on a regular basis, we now have 45 volunteers who have attended our training, are fully screened and insured, and perform a variety of services.

We now have 50 clients on our roster. Most require transportation to medical appointments. Some are dialysis patients, some go to physical therapy. We have some clients who benefit from a weekly visit from our friendly visitors who may just visit for an hour or two or take them shopping. Jewish Family Service also transports cancer patients for treatment and many of our volunteers have provided support for these clients.

I'd like to tell you about some of our clients. Two ladies are sisters, widows who live together. Both have been diagnosed with macular degeneration. Our volunteer takes them shopping, helps them read their mail and sometimes just sits and has a cup of tea with them. I was originally contacted by the daughter of one of the ladies. She was desperate for help since helping her mother and her aunt was a huge responsibility while she cared for her own family. Along with our weekly volunteer, we referred the sisters to the Association for the Visually Impaired. The organization has come through for the ladies by helping them function more efficiently in their own home. We have also referred the sisters for home delivered meals.

Another one of our clients is a veteran who frequently needs transportation to Castle Point Veterans Hospital in Beacon. Four of our volunteers are veterans and very familiar with the Castle Point campus and have taken him on his doctor visits. This is a perfect example of services which are keeping our seniors in their own homes and helping out families who are working.

We have also referred our clients for home delivered meals and other services offered by the county and local agencies. For example, this past winter we met with our town officials after we learned that some of our seniors were stranded in their own homes after record snowstorms last February. As a result, we are establishing a list of people who may need help if they lose their electricity. The town also has a telephone reassurance program that they can enroll in. We are working with our town's police department by publicizing this service.

The Jewish Family Service Friendly Visitor Program, which serves the entire community regardless of religion, already existed in Orange County, but as the towns have taken ownership of these volunteer programs, they expand and attract even more volunteers and as a result, are able to service more of our seniors.

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