

The many benefits of keeping older adults living in their own homes rather than in nursing facilities are well documented. But to do that requires making sure the necessary supports are in place to assist them as needed. Older adults can be susceptible to loneliness and physical limitations and their caregivers can often feel weighed down by the responsibilities of care.

The Department of Human Services (DHS) Senior Companion program, operated by the DHS Area Agency on Aging, brings friendship, help and hope to people who would otherwise be alone and languishing, and aids caregivers. By visiting older adults even just to play cards, Senior Companions bring a personal touch to people in need, and relieve caregivers for a few hours so they can take care of themselves.

Senior Companions themselves say the program brings them joy by creating new friendships as well as that good feeling that comes from helping a person in need. The Senior Companion program is the sort of community collaboration DHS promotes in our quest to assist county residents.

Marc Cherna
Director, Allegheny County
Department of Human Services

DHS MAKING AN IMPACT

Senior Companion Program



Adele

Adele is 74 and her mother, who lives with her, is 96 and mostly in good physical shape. But Adele's mother has Alzheimer's disease and cannot be left alone.

For Adele, the need to be a caregiver 24/7 presented many stresses and quandaries. "I had no time to go grocery shopping. I didn't have time for my own doctor's appointments."

She also had no time for leisure and, at her age, that was especially depressing. She wondered how much time she had left for enjoying life.

Then Adele heard about the Department of Human Services (DHS) Senior Companion program, overseen by the DHS Area Agency on Aging (AAA).

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Rich Fitzgerald
Allegheny County Executive

Adele continued:

Now, twice a week, Hilda comes to stay with Adele's mother for a few hours. The program is free.

"It's really a lifesaver for me," Adele said. "I think it's good for me to get away but it's also good for my mother to have someone other than myself here all the time. It's a stimulant to my mother to talk to someone other than me."

Hilda will even wake Adele's mother earlier in the day and get her up and about, thereby giving her more exercise and improving her spirits overall, Adele said. "She does take the care of my mother very seriously."

Dorothy



Dorothy, who is housebound and on oxygen, could have been moved into a nursing facility, had it not been for Senior Companions. Mary helps Dorothy out.

"Oh, wonderful Mary! You could not find a better person," said Dorothy, who has no family to assist her and who relies on neighbors and friends.

The Senior Companion program is part of the national Senior Corps, which is administered by the Corporation for National and Community Service. People who request Senior Companions must be at least age 60 and need some assistance to remain in their homes. Staying as independent as possible, in fact, is one of the program's major goals. Companions watch for safety issues, for example, and check in with participants during bad weather to make sure everything is OK.

Companions must be age 55 or older and meet income guidelines. They are trained to provide such things as respite, conversation, prepare a light

"I can't say enough about Mary. We are the same age, so we have a lot of things to talk about."

Besides companionship, Mary does such things as making sure Dorothy's dog gets out and has water. She takes out Dorothy's trash and help her prepare meals.

Dorothy said she was initially reluctant to sign up for Senior Companions once she learned of it from her caseworker. Some caregiving programs she's had proved unreliable, she said. But a friend encouraged her to give Senior Companions a try.

"That was the best shot I've ever taken," Dorothy said. "It is a wonderful program."

meal or accompany an older adult to appointments or outings.

They do not provide health or personal care or housekeeping. While they receive a small stipend for their work, most Companions join the program because they want to help. Said Hilda, who helps Adele and her mother as well as two other older adults: "When I go to their homes, they get a smile on their face. I'm making a difference in someone's life, touching a life. I feel good about that." —

The work done by Senior Companions cannot be underestimated, said John Miller, Program Manager. "They are so valued. Without them it's likely more older adults would have trouble remaining at home or face loneliness," he said.

For more information about the Senior Companion program, call 412-350-4258 or go to www.alleghenycounty.us/dhs/inhome.aspx#seniorcompanion
