

Helping Combat Loneliness

Shepherd's Center of Oakton-Vienna-Reston-Herndon adjusts its services to continue serving the elderly from a distance.

BY KARINA SOLIS
THE CONNECTION

Despite COVID-19 related closures and social distancing measures, Shepherd's Center of Oakton-Vienna-Reston-Herndon continues to serve the elderly community through a new no-contact food delivery program and virtual classes. The center's vision to create A World Without Loneliness remains intact, even from a distance.

With the SC Food Delivery Drivers program, volunteers pick up online orders or shop for groceries with prepaid gift cards, later dropping items off at seniors' front doorsteps. Executive Director of the Oakton-Vienna-Reston-Herndon center, Susan Garvey, said maintaining connections with the elderly has been challenging during this time of isolation.

"Everyone has felt lonely during COVID-19," she said. "That theme of loneliness is weaved through everything we do and we're really trying to combat it."

The nonprofit is part of a national network of centers dedicated to providing social and educational services for older members of the community. After suspending face-to-face services on March 20, Garvey said she and the board of directors focused on pushing the Friendly Caller Program. The program, which pairs volunteers with a local senior with whom they maintain regular contact over the phone, alerted Garvey to a new challenge brought on by current isolation measures.

Garvey said volunteers began reporting some of their contacts were unable to buy groceries and medications due to relatives staying away and having limited or no transportation options. After getting board approval for the delivery program, Garvey applied for funding via grants. That, along with individual donations, have helped keep the center's programs afloat during the pandemic.

While Shepherd's Center has cancelled or postponed many upcoming events, some educational programs have continued through the use of the social platform, Zoom. In April the organization launched a virtual version of its Adventures in Learning session. This was preceded by a Zoom training course for clients to familiarize themselves with the platform. Given the positive response to the new online format, Garvey said they are considering having the Adventures in Learning summer session online as well.

"To be able to have a connection by way of Zoom and see somebody has been very helpful," she said.

Garvey said the increase in demand for services was met with a subsequent increase in volunteer interest. Since March, Shepherd's Center has had 52 new volunteers sign up to work with the organization - nearly three times the amount enrolled during the same time period in 2019. Garvey said she considers this to be a positive to come out of a difficult situation for many.

"New changes have come and we're still here," she said. "We're helping."

As the community navigates its way through the pandemic, Garvey said she hopes to continue connecting with seniors and addressing their needs in a timely manner. A simple phone call, she said, has the power to do just that.

"From a friendly call comes information back to here that we can then address together."



PHOTO CONTRIBUTED

Oakton Women's Club donated 100 loop style masks and ten K95 (PPE) masks for Shepherd's Center's volunteers in the non-profit's newly formed Food Delivery Driver program to distribute to the seniors they serve. Pictured, from left, are Sheila Dunheime, Oakton Women's Club and Patti Vaughn, Vice Chair SC Board member.

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— Susan Garvey,
Executive Director



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