

Seniors Want to Help Themselves, and Others

Much of our work at the Senior Agenda has focused on building a better state long-term care system for seniors and their caregivers. A participant survey at our recent conference confirmed our priority goals for 2019: better access to reliable information on senior care choices and services; salary increases for homecare workers; a permanent funding source for the No-Fare Bus Pass program; and an individual provider program allowing recipients of Medicaid-funded homecare the option to select and manage their own care providers. All of these steps require increased state and federal funding.

However we don't expect government to solve all our problems. We would like to see local foundations and corporations do much more to support programs that reduce seniors' isolation---a condition that affects health and longevity. We think there are some opportunities that can simultaneously reduce seniors' isolation in two ways, such as programs that mobilize seniors as volunteers to provide assistance to isolated seniors. Others involve volunteers of all ages to provide a variety of tasks for isolated seniors. Here are some aging in community initiatives we would like to see the private sector support in 2019:

Our first suggestion would be seed funding for startups of new "villages without walls" patterned after The Providence Village. These villages are community membership organizations that connect members with each other and with resources to help members age in the community. Such villages would be mutual self-help organizations run by large pools of volunteers supported by a small paid staff. Just as the Providence Village does, they would provide access to community services and supports as well as volunteer-provided rides, companionship, and educational and social activities. The Providence Village has just received a Tufts Health Plan Foundation grant to assist new village startups in other Rhode Island cities and towns. More information is available on their website <https://www.providencevillageri.org/>.

A second suggestion would be to support increasing the number of volunteer-driver senior transit programs, especially in rural and suburban areas lacking robust public transit and taxi service. They could be based on proven models such as F.I.S.H. serving North Kingstown and Exeter, and Southern RI Volunteers in

Wakefield. Many seniors and younger persons are willing to be volunteer drivers or schedulers, but some funding for mileage, insurance and scheduling costs is needed.

Another worthwhile project would be a program that recruits and screens volunteers of all ages to provide a wide range of “chore services” for seniors. These services could include home cleaning, simple home repairs, lawn and garden work, and badly needed help with snow shoveling, to name just a few tasks.

There’s a very important caveat to all of this. Good volunteer programs are not free. A volunteer program that will attract willing volunteers and provide quality assistance to others almost always requires some paid staff, not to mention funds for insurance, communicating with the community, and bookkeeping to ensure donors that their funds are accounted for. Depending on the service, volunteers may need to receive some reimbursement for their out-of-pocket expenses in order to attract enough people.

Many seniors want to volunteer to do meaningful community work that helps others. They are an underutilized asset for our communities. We’d like to see 2019 be a year when we connect those assets with an effort to reduce seniors’ isolation in Rhode Island.