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WILLMAR, MINN. SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 9, 2024 - SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 10, 2024 WCTRIB.COM

Contributed / Sara Maher

Each year a luminary is created and lit for each one of Renville County Walk in the Park's newly diagnosed cancer survivors. They are all placed in the shape of a heart, as shown here at Nester Park in Olivia in August 2024. Walk in the Park is a nonprofit dedicated to providing emotional and supportive services to cancer patients in Renville County.

A BIG SHOUT-OUT

Renville County volunteers foster urban-rural connection for cancer survivors

BY TOM CHERVENY
West Central Tribune

OLIVIA

The rural-urban divide has been getting a lot of attention this election cycle.

Put the politics aside: Here's a rural-urban connection that is getting some well-deserved attention.

The University of Minnesota's Office of Academic Clinical Affairs recently put the spotlight on Renville County and a group of volunteers there who are aiding important cancer research at the Masonic Cancer Center.

SURVIVORS on A6

Contributed / Sara Maher

Renville County cancer survivor Todd "Howie" Howard, left, and Dr. Silvia Balbo of the University of Minnesota Masonic Cancer Center are shown at a community event in Renville County she attended in this undated photo published in the University article about the relationship between the center and Renville County Walk in the Park.

Council declines hiring recruitment firm for Willmar police chief opening

BY JENNIFER KOTILA
West Central Tribune

Felt

Davis

O'Brien

Ask

Asmus

Shuldes

WILLMAR — The Willmar City Council on Monday in a 3-5 split vote declined hiring a recruiting firm to assist in the search for a new Willmar police chief.

Councilor Justin Ask made the motion to contract with Baker Tilly, one of four recruiting firms that submitted proposals that met the city's requirements, and Councilor Audrey Nelsen seconded the motion.

Voting in favor of the motion were Ask, Nelsen and Councilor Julie Asmus. Councilors Vicki Davis, Carl Shuldes, Mike O'Brien, Tom Butterfield and Rick Fagerlie voted against the motion.

Councilors who voted in favor of hiring the recruiting firm noted it would do a better job of vetting the candidates.

Councilors who voted against hiring the recruiting firm noted that there are qualified candidates currently within the Willmar Police Department and others throughout the region. Referring to comments made by recently retired Police Chief Jim Felt, they thought the search could be conducted by city staff.

Felt addressed the council during the public comment portion of the meeting, noting that hiring a recruitment firm for the cost of $22,000 to $29,000 is "extravagant" and not needed. That money could be used for "far greater good" within the Police Department or city.

He explained that hiring a recruiting firm would be a duplication of city resources and the police commission members that have the ability to screen candidates and make a recommendation for the position.

"I ask you to reflect on the service that Willmar PD has provided to the community," Felt commented. " ... I urge you to focus on local candidates, local meaning within this department and this region of Minnesota. Policing varies greatly from state to state and even the metro area than Willmar. Look for the people that hold the same values, invested in the community, and know what meets this area the best."

Councilors agreed with Felt's recommendation to conduct a search regionally. However, some also thought that the city could focus just on internal candidates.

"I feel like Chief Felt told us in his email that there are six officers here that fulfill the requirements set forth, and I trust his judgment," Davis said. "If he feels

COUNCIL on A2

SURVIVORS
CONTINUED from A1

In recent years, the nonprofit known as the Renville County Walk in the Park has contributed a total of $150,000 to research led by Dr. Silvia Balbo at the center.

The connection between the Masonic Center and Balbo's research team was featured in a story, "Renville County, Minn. advocates take on colon cancer research," published recently by the center.

In the article, Balbo credits the financial support for helping make possible the purchase of new equipment that has provided important research data. Working with the International Agency for Research on Cancer, the teams have made discoveries on the role of inflammation in lung carcinogenesis.

"It will help inform lung cancer prevention and early detection efforts across the globe," according to the article.

Renville County volunteers and Balbo and her team have developed a strong relationship thanks to their connection, according to Sara Maher, who is the executive director of Walk in the Park.

Volunteers with Walk in the Park have toured Balbo's lab and viewed the equipment their support is helping make possible. The $1 million machine even sports a blue star emblem the Renville County Sheriff's Office uses in fundraising for the local group.

In turn, Balbo has made trips to Renville County to meet with survivors and donors and speak about the research.

This connection is credited to what is otherwise a very locally focused mission. Walk in the Park is an outgrowth of the two-decades-long Relay for Life in Renville County.

Seven years ago, approximately 75 of the Relay for Life volunteers in the county decided "we needed to take care of our own friends and neighbors and family," according to Maher.

They joined to develop a support system in the county. Walk in the Park provides anyone in the county who is diagnosed with cancer with a "bag of blessings" backpack for their cancer journey.

The backpack contains a collection of items to aid in recovery, including things like a seat belt comfort pad for those with ports who are making long drives to cancer care at distant facilities. The package also includes mints, to cope with the metallic taste experienced during radiation treatment, and handmade quilts for keeping warm.

The blessings backpack also includes coloring books by Renville County's young entrepreneur and artist Autumn Stryker. She originally developed the coloring book for cancer survivors in memory of her grandmother.

Along with the backpack, Walk in the Park offers up to $2,500 per year for three years to help survivors with expenses related to their treatment. For many, treatment may require travel and overnight stays at locations in the Twin Cities or Rochester, Maher explained.

The expenses can be challenging, and are always unexpected.

"Nobody signs up for cancer," said Maher.

Ten different teams of volunteers raise funds in the county. This year they've raised $181,000, said Maher.

As of June, the local group had already received requests of $68,000 from cancer survivors for assistance.

Last year, Walk in the Park provided $90,930.58 in reimbursements to cancer survivors in the county, and 75 bags to newly diagnosed survivors. Last year's contribution to the University of Minnesota research totaled $40,000.

The organization also donated funds to Hope Lodge in honor of county cancer survivors who stayed in the organization's lodging locations while in medical care.

Maher said the connection to Balbo began a few years ago. A group of volunteers began looking at cancer research with an eye toward supporting it. They decided to support research on lung and colon cancers. Each year, there are approximately 75 new survivors of the two cancers in the county.

They learned about Balbo's research, much of which focuses on identifying biomarkers to detect cancers early.

Maher said volunteers are proud to know that their support of the Masonic Cancer Center research has such a far-reaching impact. The center's research will be featured at upcoming national and international cancer conferences.

It's exciting to know, she said, that a small county in Minnesota — population 14,723 — can help make a difference in such a big way.

She's also hoping that other counties will follow Renville County's Walk in the Park model for helping cancer survivors. Those wanting more information can email her at rcwalkinthepark@gmail.com.

Contributed / Sara Maher

The Renville County Walk in the Park provides each newly diagnosed cancer survivor with a "Bag of Blessings" containing a collection of items to help them in the journey ahead.

Contributed / Masonic Cancer Center

Members of the Renville County Walk in the Park toured the Masonic Cancer Center research facility in September 2024. From left are Cameo Van Horn, Brenda Frank, Sara Maher and Kim Bailey. The local group has contributed toward equipment in the lab where Dr. Silvia Balbo, back right, conducts cancer research. The $1 million machine even sports a blue star emblem the Renville County Sheriff's Office uses in fundraising for the local group. Foster Jacobs, front, is a Bilbo lab team member.