

Spirit of Community as We Age - article for 01/02/2009

By Vikki Carpenter, Director, Human Services

“Over the river and through the woods to grandmother’s house we go”...Many of us remember this song from our childhood, but our grandmother’s house is not across the Peace or Myakka River. Our communities have changed as we have aged and families often live hundreds of miles away. We have some area seniors who retired and moved here from Midwestern and Northern communities in Ohio, Michigan, New York and Massachusetts and are now our “senior” seniors well over 80 years old. While once healthy and actively enjoying the sun, surf and golf, they have become frail and dependent on their Charlotte community to help coordinate their financial and medical care.

Charlotte County’s Human Services’ Senior Services Division assists over 300 seniors with managing their daily living activities so they can remain in their homes. Five case managers and one case aide work to develop an individualized care plan which includes support services such as homemaker, personal care (hygiene); assistive equipment and medical supplies; respite (caregiver relief); companionship; home delivered and group meals, nutrition counseling; and transportation. Case managers become like family for their clients as they advocate on their behalf to secure a safe and healthy environment. In coordinating a senior’s care plan, the case manager works with other community and governmental agencies, home health agencies, physicians, churches, friends and neighbors, and family near and far. The service guidelines and standards for care that are used come from the Community Care for the Elderly Program, Alzheimer’s Disease Initiative Program, Home Care for the Elderly Program, the Older American’s Act Program, and the Home and Community Based Care Medicaid Waiver Program. Funding for these in-home and community services are provided from state and federal grants, and matching funds, through the Florida Department of Elder Affairs, the Area Agency on Aging for Southwest Florida, the Charlotte County Board of County Commissioners and local fees and donations.

Shrinking state and local budgets have created new challenges for the care of our frail elders. While looking for alternative resources, we are faced with the realization that we “baby boomers” are now becoming seniors and our needs as we age will have an even greater impact on our community based on the sheer number of us and our longer expected life spans. As a community, we need to plan to manage our care and that of our older seniors. So what can we do now? Here are some suggestions: 1. Become a part of your neighborhood’s community design. By actively defining your community, you can develop relationships with your neighbors and community planners to help shape an “aging in place” concept that includes age-friendly designs such as street signs, lighting and sidewalks. 2. Meet your neighbors to establish a bond of friendship, caring, well-being and security. As we age without family in close proximity, we may need to call on assistance from our neighbors. 3. Modify your home to plan for easy mobility in and out of rooms, baths, and entry ways. 4. Volunteer through your church, club, association, or favorite non-profit agency to assist seniors with their daily activities by shopping, picking up prescriptions or sitting with a home bound senior while the 24 hour caregiver takes a break. 5. Contribute to the mutual benefit of educating our young people on the needs of the aging senior population and reciprocate by educating yourself on the needs of our young people. Developing inter-generational activities and programs builds our strength as a well-rounded, well-adjusted and caring community. 6. Maintain a healthy life style of exercise, rest and diet. Go to routine scheduled medical examinations and follow your doctor’s recommendations. 7. Keep a positive mental attitude. Negativism and apathy are breeding grounds for depression. 8. Support continued funding of the in-home and community services programs for seniors. The average annual care plan of a senior living in his/her home is less than \$10,000. The average annual nursing home care in Florida is over \$65,000; and lastly, 9. Live, Laugh, Love and have a Happy 2009.

For more information on volunteerism and senior services dial, 2-1-1 Charlotte County’s Information and Referral Call Center or call the Elder Helpline in Fort Myers at 1-866-413-5337.