



advocacy | action | answers on aging



# Volunteers Making a Difference in the Lives of Older Adults

## FIVE ON-THE-GROUND EXAMPLES

The Aging Network Volunteer Resource Center (the Center) supports proven volunteer management practices and promotes volunteer involvement by older adults. A program of the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging (n4a), and funded by the Administration on Community Living (ACL), the Center builds the capacity of Area Agencies on Aging to engage older adult volunteers and to enrich the experience of these volunteers with the goal of increasing the number of older volunteers who help meet important community needs.



This paper provides a snapshot of five effective volunteer programs for older adults to inspire others to replicate similar initiatives. The selected programs represent a mix of localities, clients served, scope of service and management models. The five programs include: Community Education/Outreach Program, Georgia; Vet to Vet Program, Maine; Friendly Caller Program, Utah; Bus Buddies Program, New York; and the Wisconsin Advocacy Team and the Dane County Legislative/Advocacy Committee.

These five programs demonstrate the Aging Network's flexibility and innovation in meeting the needs of older adults. Each one is resourceful in developing meaningful volunteer opportunities to address a critical community need. For example, in Maine, veterans are paired with fellow veterans to provide much-needed companionship and developing a bond strengthened by their shared military service. In New York, one volunteer is changing the lives of rural, older adults who now have greater independence.

The volunteers engaged in these five programs represent the thousands of volunteers across the country who give their time and talents to ensure that older Americans and people with disabilities live with dignity and choices in their homes and communities for as long as possible.

Three of the five programs are Retired and Senior Volunteer Programs (RSVP). RSVP is part of the Corporation for National and Community Service's Senior Corps. Nationwide, there are 208,000 RSVP volunteers who provide more than 46 million hours of volunteer service.

# Community Education/Outreach Program

## Atlanta Regional Commission Area Agency on Aging, Metro Atlanta Retired and Senior Volunteer Program

urban • wellness focus • encourages social interaction • shared leadership

### Program Site

The Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) has sponsored the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) since 2008. ARC is the regional planning and intergovernmental coordination agency for a largely urban 10-county area, including the city of Atlanta. ARC is also the Area Agency on Aging for the region.

### Program Overview

RSVP is one of the Corporation for National and Community Service's Senior Corps programs. It began in 1969 when it was authorized as part of the Older Americans Act. Metro Atlanta RSVP offers several options for older adults to use their skills to engage and help other seniors maintain their health and independence.

One of the options is the Community Education/Outreach Program, in which trained volunteers offer 12 different one-hour presentations that focus on a range of topics including fitness, nutrition, medication management, healthy sexuality, disaster preparedness and diabetes awareness. Using a peer-to-peer education model where seniors work with and teach other seniors, community educators

conduct presentations free of charge at senior centers, senior residences, Parks and Recreation facilities, churches, libraries and schools. While there is a seasonal quality to the presentations, sites used and topics offered (e.g., health fairs in the spring and summer, diabetes awareness month in March, Older Americans' Month in May), volunteers generally work throughout the year.

Metro Atlanta RSVP's Ambassadors, who are volunteers themselves, recruit volunteers and promote the program in the community; some volunteers lead and facilitate the various training modules, staff community health fairs and events and help with many of the administrative tasks associated with the program, including marketing, event scheduling and data entry.

“RSVP volunteers are critical to the mission of the Area Agency on Aging. We are very fortunate to have people of passion, purpose and energy to support our efforts to ensure that older adults have the resources and information they need to continue to live independently.”

—ARC Staff



Currently 186 volunteers serve with Metro Atlanta RSVP and the program continues to grow. As information changes, new trends develop or new topics are suggested, presentations are updated and new ones added to the roster. Metro Atlanta RSVP recently completed a two-day workshop that addressed end-of-life issues and is currently developing a presentation that covers issues related to mental health and depression. In 2015-2016, more than 37,000 people in the metro area were served through its community education/outreach programs.

Unique aspects of the program include:

- Using volunteers to promote RSVP and recruit and train new volunteers.
- Having retired professionals from a variety of disciplines and life experiences—teachers, medical and health practitioners or trainers—that serve as RSVP Community Educators.
- Using Volgistics, a volunteer management software, to track volunteer hours.
- Scheduling and staffing events with volunteers at least a month in advance.
- Providing volunteers with ongoing training and coaching.
- Holding quarterly meetings with volunteers to discuss new recruitment strategies, assess current presentations and determine what new topics and programming to develop.

While the average age of the community educators is in the mid-60s, the most dedicated and reliable volunteers tend to be those in their 70s and 80s.

## **What Is Necessary to Run the Program?**

Connections with natural allies, such as hospitals, senior centers and universities, facilitate access to places to give presentations, partners to help develop new topics and opportunities to help recruit new volunteers. Examples of collaborations:

- Georgia State University and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, collaborated to conduct an area-wide workshop on healthy sexuality for seniors from which a presentation on that topic was developed.
- Truly Living Well Center for Natural Urban Agriculture developed presentations on food security, promotion of the Senior Supplemental Nutrition Program (SNAP) and lessons in urban agriculture, such as growing vegetables in your apartment.
- Grady Hospital and Emory University are currently developing a teaching module to help older adults prepare for hospital stays and issues to be aware of during and after the stay.
- Stanford University's evidence-based Chronic Disease Self-Management Program *Living Well* volunteers help empower people with chronic conditions to cope with common symptoms such as pain, fatigue, difficult emotions and stress.

The program benefits from a committed base of trained volunteers. ARC staff is also intentional about building in succession planning. They regularly identify and develop new volunteer leaders who can replace leaders who leave.

## **What Makes This Program Replicable?**

RSVP is a well-established program of the Corporation for National and Community Service. Accepted programs must meet certain requirements (visit <https://www.nationalservice.gov/programs/senior-corps/senior-corps-faqs> for more information). All of the Atlanta Regional Commission's materials used by the Community Educators are available to share.

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# ***Vet to Vet Program***

## **Retired and Senior Volunteer Program, Southern Maine Agency on Aging**

urban • serves vets • encourages social interaction • shared leadership

### **Program Site**

The Vet to Vet program is a Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) funded program operating out of the Southern Maine Agency on Aging (SMAA). The innovative program received a 2016 n4a Aging Achievement Award and a 2016 Myra Kraft Community MVP Award, which included a cash award.

The area served by the agency—York and Cumberland counties—is largely rural and has a high per capita number of veterans. Maine was once home to a number of military bases, and many servicemen and women have chosen to make Maine their home in retirement.

### **Program Overview**

Trained Vet to Vet volunteers visit with veterans in their homes at least twice a month, swapping stories, providing much-needed companionship and developing a bond strengthened by their shared military service. Volunteers link veterans to services and programs of SMAA and other social service organizations, Maine Bureau of Veterans' Services and the Veterans Administration when needed. Clients include veterans from WWII to the Gulf Wars.

The Vet to Vet project has meant veterans have someone to talk to, a friend who can share stories and spend time with them, easing the isolation many have felt as their friends have died or moved away. For some, it may be the first time they have been able to talk about their war experiences. Because they are veterans, too, the volunteers already have something in common with those they are visiting. The veteran pairs may go out for coffee or lunch, participate in activities and interests they both share, or simply sit and talk.

To qualify as a visitor, volunteers must:

- Have served in the military (combatant or noncombatant).
- Commit to visit a veteran in his or her home at least twice a month for a year.
- Participate in training in communications skills, social services available for veterans and other pertinent information.
- Pass a background and license check.
- Provide three references.

Vet to Vet volunteers have helped their vets resolve Medicare overcharges, apply for Veterans Administration-funded glasses and hearing aids, install safety bars, set up respite care for a wife with dementia, arrange transportation to medical appointments, apply for VA health and other benefits and utilize other services. Often, volunteers' visits provide needed respite for the spouses of the veterans they visit. One wife was so grateful to be able to spend some time on her own that she prepared a traditional Thanksgiving dinner for the volunteer to thank him for his visits to her husband.

“As vets age they seem to be forgotten. The need is huge for volunteer veterans to visit and share life stories with other veterans.”

—*Director of Volunteer Services, Southern Maine Agency on Aging*

The program has had an impact on the lives of volunteers as well as on the veterans who receive visits. They have received great satisfaction from helping another veteran, have gained a friend, and, in some cases, have been able to access benefits for themselves as well as the veterans they visit. Jim, a combat veteran, visits a World War II Marine who fought at Iwo Jima. Occasionally, the two share war stories that still haunt them: “We just have this understanding that we both shared in something. We don’t have to talk a lot about it. We’ve got this bond now and that’s what makes it great.” He adds, “I thought I was adopting a veteran. Now I feel like he’s adopted me.”

Prior to volunteering, visitors must go through a background check (funded by a local American Veterans Post), provide three references and participate in a nine-hour training program, which includes information on active listening, dealing with difficult clients, resources and benefits available to veterans, dementia and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other topics. Volunteers receive a notebook of articles, reference materials and resources.

Ongoing volunteer education and support includes:

- Case reviews every other month where topics of interest are discussed.
- Speakers who provide training on requested topics such as suicide prevention.
- Volunteers offer each other support and assistance and receive a newsletter with information on available trainings, new resources to assist clients and activities for veterans.

In September 2016, the program began using the n4a Power UP! approach to volunteer engagement. This approach includes teams of volunteers and shared leadership in developing outcomes and strategies. Vet to Vet staff prepared an issue brief, recruited Vet to Vet volunteers and veteran leaders of statewide stature, including Maine National Guard Major General John W. Libby, Ret., to steer Vet to Vet expansion and development.

Vet to Vet staff provides data and assistance and serve as liaisons to SMAA. Shared leadership has provided focus and enabled staff with no military experience to see the program through the eyes of veterans. It has also led to valuable contacts within and outside veteran circles and help with fundraising and outreach. The shared leadership concept has expanded the program's vision for Vet to Vet and refined their goals in ways they never would have considered without the volunteer leaders.

Most of the program's current volunteers are newly retired.

### **What Is Necessary to Run the Program?**

- A retired military population.
- Individuals connected to the military community to serve as liaisons and help with fundraising, recruitment and outreach.
- Links with community agencies to support the program (e.g., partnerships with American Veterans, Maine Veterans' Home, which hosts the training, and other military and community organizations).
- Staff for client interviews/processing; client-visitor matching; volunteer interviews and processing; volunteer outreach (recruitment) and training; assistance and referral help for volunteers and clients; and publicity, public speaking and fundraising. This program is run by a 12-hours-a-week Volunteer Services Coordinator. The RSVP grant pays for this part-time position. The program also receives part-time help from an administrative assistant and three to six hours a week of administrative help from a volunteer as well as on-staff social workers who help interview clients for the program. The Manager of Volunteer Services also provides aid and assistance to the program.

### **What Makes This Program Replicable?**

The program meets needs prevalent throughout the nation wherever a population of veterans exists; relies heavily on volunteers, which allows the program to operate on a modest budget; and provides a step-by-step blueprint, including necessary forms and a plan for outreach, that is available free of charge in paper copy or CD from Southern Maine Agency on Aging.

Vet to Vet is an RSVP program. RSVP is a well-established program of the Corporation for National and Community Service. Accepted programs must meet certain requirements (visit <https://www.nationalservice.gov/programs/senior-corps/senior-corps-faqs> for more information). Resources about the Power UP! approach to volunteer teams and shared leadership, as well as training, are available from n4a.

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# ***Bus Buddies Program***

## **Schuyler County, New York, Office for the Aging**

rural • community focus • encourages social interaction

### **Program Site**

The Bus Buddies Program is housed in the largely rural Schuyler County, New York, Office for the Aging (OFA) under the Mobility Management Program at the Arc of Schuyler County. Schuyler County has fewer than 19,000 residents.

### **Program Overview**

The Bus Buddy program is a great example of how even just one dedicated and energetic volunteer can make a difference, especially in rural communities where recruiting volunteers presents its own unique challenges. The program is now ready to build off its success, expand volunteer involvement and create connections between generations.

The Schuyler County bus system is fewer than six years old and there was concern that it was being underutilized. A committee was formed to discuss increasing ridership, particularly among seniors who may not have other means of transportation. When asked about using the bus, some seniors expressed fear that it was too complicated or a perception that it was inconvenient. The idea for the Bus Buddies Program sprung from these discussions.

The goal of the Bus Buddies Program is to teach people to ride the bus independently. It uses a social approach to the training called *Transit and Tea*. This three-part training series orients riders to the schedules, routes and general protocols of bus ridership; includes a bus ride to a local café for coffee and discussion of other OFA-provided services and prepares trainees for a solo trip to a destination of their choosing. In addition to conducting the trainings, the Bus Buddy volunteer regularly rides the transit route at different times of the day to answer questions such as how to request a stop off the scheduled route, promote the Bus Buddy service, provide riders with directions and cues and occasionally ask survey questions to improve transportation.

Currently, the program relies on one Bus Buddy volunteer. Prior to retirement, she used public transportation for her commute as a less stressful way to get to work. She believes that public transportation can be an excellent choice, not a less desirable option when you can no longer drive. The Bus Buddy volunteer shares valuable information and insights with the Mobility Manager regarding unmet transportation needs, areas for service improvement and compliments for transit employees. The Bus Buddy volunteer is scheduled through the Transportation Link-Line, Schuyler County's One Call Center that is managed by the Mobility Manager. The program intends to schedule additional group training sessions beginning in the spring of 2017.

The program would like to have a volunteer on the bus every morning and afternoon to give senior riders a helping hand. They have reached out to the local high school for volunteers and hope to have students working for the Bus Buddies Program in the future.

To qualify for a Bus Buddy position, volunteers must:

- Possess strong communication skills and be friendly.
- Be able to learn the bus system, including scheduled pickup points and stops, Dial-a-Ride option, printed schedule and how to coordinate with other transportation options.
- Be able to abide by standards of privacy and confidentiality.
- Be able to display tact, courtesy and integrity.

### **What Is Necessary to Run the Program?**

Strong commitments from both the bus system and the lead agency are a key to the program's success. In addition, one or two committed, part-time staff and cheerleaders are important to its smooth operation, supporting volunteers, and maintaining relationships with the transit system and partners.

The program contact noted that the main costs for the program are advertising and newsletter publication. The Arc of Schuyler County, who operates the bus system, provides refreshments for trainings. Other promotion includes information about the Bus Buddies Program shared by the transportation committee with other county-level agencies, including: Veterans' Services, Department of Social Service, RSVP and the Departments of Public and Mental Health. A half-hour local television program, *Senior Notebook*, aired a story about the Bus Buddies Program and interviewed the Bus Buddy volunteer.

### **What Makes This Program Replicable?**

This program is low-cost requiring only part-time staff oversight and support. It also requires a strong commitment from the local transportation agency. The Schuyler County Office for the Aging can provide a replicable training model, including volunteer duties and qualifications.

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# ***Friendly Caller Program***

## **Davis County (Utah) Health Department, Retired and Senior Volunteer Program**

suburban • community focus • encourages social interaction • adaptable for volunteers who are homebound

### **Program Site**

The Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) funded Friendly Caller Program has been operating through the Davis County Health Department since 2013. Davis County is Utah's smallest in land mass, but the third (out of 29) most populated with approximately 336,000 residents. The county is an interlocking network of suburban communities around a core of towns within proximity to downtown Salt Lake City.

### **Program Overview**

Volunteers place weekly phone calls to homebound or isolated seniors to provide them with positive interaction, reassurance and a wellness check. The volunteers are matched with older adults to the best of the program's ability, with military experience, gender and specific interests or hobbies as criteria. Each volunteer is asked to contact two older adults weekly. The average call is 10 minutes long and can last up to a half-hour.

This program affords individuals an opportunity to volunteer without leaving their homes, which is ideal for seniors who no longer drive or are homebound for health reasons. It gives them an opportunity to contribute and helps to reduce social isolation. Programs must build in staff time for training and data collection at the homebound volunteers' homes.

Training and orientation are provided for both volunteer callers and older adults receiving the calls. Staff holds face-to-face meetings with volunteers to review forms, policies and procedures; collect fingerprints; and to follow drug-testing procedures for non-homebound volunteers. In order to maintain confidentiality, volunteers are only given the first name and telephone number of the older adults they are calling. Staff calls receivers to provide them with the name of their caller and to establish a date and time for the first call.

News and updates are shared with volunteers via e-mail, phone and newsletters.

**T**he Friendly Caller Program currently has 18 volunteers and has served 56 older adults in the past two and a half years. The current group of volunteers ranges in age from 57 to 90, with an average age of 73.

### **What Is Necessary to Run the Program?**

Partnerships with individuals or agencies that already serve the homebound population, such as Meals on Wheels, Senior Services case workers and assisted living programs are needed for outreach to potential volunteer callers or older adults who receive calls. Staff has also run articles in *Senior Scoop*, a local newsletter for seniors, and via social media. A program manager and program coordinator provide staff support and coordination.

### **What Makes This Program Replicable?**

The Friendly Caller Program has an easily transferable structure. It is also possible for long-time, experienced volunteers to assist in coordinating activities and training new volunteers. Materials that include the Friendly Caller job description, a Friendly Caller Guide with policies and procedures, volunteer confidentiality statement and a code of conduct are available from the Davis County Health Department.

The Friendly Caller Program is an RSVP program. RSVP is a well-established program of the Corporation for National and Community Service. Accepted programs must meet certain requirements (visit <https://www.nationalservice.gov/programs/senior-corps/senior-corps-faqs> for more information).

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# Wisconsin Advocacy Team

## Greater Wisconsin Agency on Aging Resources, Inc. and the Dane County Legislative/Advocacy Committee, Area Agency on Aging of Dane County

urban and rural • community focus • encourages social interaction • self-directed volunteer teams

### Program Site

The Wisconsin Advocacy Team is a project of the Wisconsin Aging Advocacy Network, which is chartered by the Greater Wisconsin Agency on Aging Resources, Inc. (GWAAR). The Dane County Legislative/Advocacy Committee falls under the AAA of Dane County, which includes the city of Madison.

### Program Overview

The Wisconsin Advocacy Team uses self-directed volunteer teams, with volunteers who have backgrounds in advocacy. Working collaboratively with the various associations of aging professionals—senior centers, nutrition directors, aging unit/ADRC directors, etc., they decide which issues—state and federal—they want to pursue and with whom they need to connect to make an impact.

As part of the Wisconsin Aging Advocacy Network (WAAN), the volunteers conduct trainings on state and federal issues. This WAAN/GWAAR advocacy team also has older adult professionals and volunteers active in advocacy at the state level. They meet with department heads, legislators and representatives from the governor's office to advance aging priorities.

The Dane County Legislative/Advocacy Committee works with senior centers in the county to determine the most pressing aging-related issues to work on during each county budget cycle. In 2016, volunteer advocates lobbied for funds for 15 senior centers and received 97 percent of funds requested.

Volunteers also serve on the AAA Legislative/Advocacy Committee, a standing committee of the AAA Board of Dane County. As part of that committee, volunteers submit position statements to the AAA Board for approval and also make recommendations on evolving senior issues. One volunteer member of the AAA Legislative/Advocacy Committee also provides advocacy for issues in the Milwaukee area and writes articles on issues of concern to the aging community.

### Advocacy Team Training Includes:

- Introductions to state and local officials.
- Discussion of what advocacy entails.
- Review of case studies and steps on how to put together an advocacy plan of action.

Volunteers for both advocacy groups generally have backgrounds in advocacy, but some come up through the ranks via trainings on advocacy for seniors, which the Advocacy Team has been conducting for the past five years.

Trained individuals are invited to future trainings/seminars and sent advocacy alerts via e-mail, whether the action requested is to drive phone calls, attend hearings or write letters. The trainees represent every level of knowledge and involvement. Some trainees have their own topics they wish to pursue: one recent trainee uses her training to lobby for dental coverage under Medicare. Because of regulations and other red tape, volunteer advocates can often lobby for things that staff cannot.

### **What Is Necessary to Run the Program?**

Agency staff keep track of issues at local, state and federal levels and share information on hot- button topics that affect the aging population and determine what materials and knowledge are required to support volunteers in achieving their goals.

The advocates require support within the organization including space to meet, use of copy machines and computers and mentoring on the next steps in a given process.

### **What Makes This Program Replicable?**

This program requires minimal staff support. A staff liaison with a background in advocacy and public policy can provide guidance. Workshop information about developing local legislative/advocacy committees is available from GWAAR. Materials are also available to share, including the by-laws of the group, information on self-directed volunteer teams, and advocacy resources.

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## Conclusion

n4a is grateful for the time and dedication of the five program representatives who were generous with their time, thoughtful with their answers and passionate about their programs. They shared stories about hardworking experienced volunteers who have been very effective in reducing isolation and loneliness in clients because of their programs.

For example, an annual survey conducted by the Davis County (Utah) Home Delivered Meals Program found that 87 percent of clients (including some who also participate in the Friendly Caller Program) felt more connected since beginning to participate in the program(s). After learning how to take public transportation from the Bus Buddies Program, an older adult, no longer able to drive, now takes bus excursions to enjoy the beauty of nature throughout the community.



The program representatives also shared their hopes and concerns for the future. The Volunteer Services Coordinator from the Community Education/Outreach Program wonders how the interests and priorities of the next generation of volunteers will affect programs and volunteering in general.

A volunteer with the self-directed Wisconsin Advocacy Team shared her thoughts on her generation, saying: “Many people despair that baby boomers will be a burden, but our generation can be a tremendous asset as well.” The Aging Network faces many challenges including a fast-growing senior population, with many individuals having complex medical and social needs, and uncertain funding to meet these needs. One certainty is that the reliance on volunteers will continue to grow. Indeed, their skills and experience—and the benefits they receive—make volunteer engagement a win-win for all of us.

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