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United Way programs aimed at helping region's seniors

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By CYNTHIA TAGGART
Special to The Bee

The woman who called ElderHelp in 1995 had had no hot water at home for two years. She lived on \$238 a month. Her rent was \$150.

"It cracked my foundation," said John Corcoran, the plumber who responded to the call. "The Coeur d'Alene Association of Realtors paid for a water heater and I installed it free."

Corcoran owns Resort Properties by the Lake now and directs ElderHelp of North Idaho. The organization provides firewood, wheelchair ramps and food to seniors to help them continue living on their own.

ElderHelp is one of five programs for seniors to which United Way of Kootenai County this year directed donations that area residents gave during its annual community campaign. Supporting senior independence is a local United Way priority.

"We want donors to know their money helps their neighbors and strengthens our community," said Caryl Johnston, executive director of United Way of Kootenai County.

Studies show most seniors want to stay independent.

"Home ownership is a huge asset at the end of life," said Pearl Bouchard, director of Area Agency on Aging in North Idaho. "They want to give it to their heirs, and selling it to move into a care facility is devastating. Then there's the emotional toll of giving up their independence."

Bouchard's agency and the Panhandle Health District run programs that keep seniors engaged, socially connected, productive and independent. Both fit United Way goals and received support this year.

PHD's Senior Companions matches healthy older adults with frail seniors who need minor assistance, such as light grocery shopping, to stay independent in their own homes.

Eighty-three Senior Companions visit 423 seniors in the five northern counties.

Last year, Senior Companions logged 62,708 hours and traveled 143,396 miles helping area seniors stay independent.

"They become the eyes and ears of extended family when the family isn't there," said Mary DeTienne, director of PHD's Home Health division which coordinates Senior Companions. "We always have a waiting list. We'd extend services to more seniors if we had more money."

George Holcomb, of Rathdrum, has served as a Senior Companion for eight years.

His service earns him a stipend of \$2.65 an hour. At 81, Holcomb has a bushy white beard and mustache and wears American flag suspenders. He operates like someone a decade younger.

A former military aircraft mechanic, Holcomb often is matched with veterans. He visits three clients now weekly with a briefcase full of movies and a mind full of stories.

"I believe your rewards in life will always be equal to your service to others," he said.

Holcomb stays with clients until they move to a care facility or die. Like most Senior Companions, he needs the visits as much as his clients do.

"I have the inspiration of desperation," he said. "People say I should slow down. I can't give this up. I need the money, as little as it is. It gives me an excuse to get out of bed in the mornings."

Area Agency on Aging's Retired Senior Volunteer Program matches seniors' lifetime skills with community needs. Through RSVP, 600 seniors volunteer in about 80 organizations. They serve in schools, food banks, animal shelters, libraries and more.

"RSVP is one of the best medicines against loss," AAA's Bouchard said. "We all want to feel needed."

For seniors retired and living alone, maintaining social connections is often difficult. Hayden Senior GEMS Center provides a weekly meal at its facility to keep seniors connected and fed. The program earned United Way's support.

Sandra Morris won't skip the weekly lunch. Retirement changed her world. Social contacts from work ended. She's often one of 25 seniors who gather at the center to eat, talk and laugh together.

"I have seniors living alone who don't prepare meals," said Barbara Tennery, the center's volunteer director. "These meals get them out of the house, fed. The social contacts keep them mentally healthy."

United Way's support will help the Hayden center start a second weekly meal and qualify for Area Agency on Aging funding.

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"I plan to go to both meals," Morris said as she dined on pork loin roast, mashed potatoes and corn rolls at the Thursday lunch. Each meal costs her \$3. "I come every week and talk other people into coming so I don't have to eat alone."

Some families enable seniors to stay in their homes by providing their care, a commitment that can exhaust the provider's health. Social workers at the Area Agency on Aging direct homebound seniors and their care providers to community resources, a program United Way helps support.

Resources include the Circuit Breaker program that reduces seniors' property taxes, Meals on Wheels that delivers cooked meals to their home, and social and recreational programs that relieve family caregivers of some work.

The popular program serves 1,200 people, and 114 are on a waiting list.

"It's not adequately funded," Bouchard said. "It gets state and federal funding and help from United Way, but it's not enough to help everyone who needs it."

ElderHelp is an organization of neighbors helping neighbors, a concept United Way promotes. Corcoran contacts up to 700 people to cut firewood, collect food and install portable mobility ramps for seniors living on their own.

Last year, ElderHelp delivered 150 cords of firewood and 16,600 pounds of non-perishable food to area seniors.

Corcoran likes to tell how ElderHelp aided a quadriplegic woman who needed a ramp and an indoor shower. She'd hooked a hose to her kitchen sink and showered on her deck for 16 years because the indoor shower was unusable. ElderHelp fixed her shower for wheelchair use and installed a ramp.

United Way is all about neighbors helping neighbors, Johnston says.



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