

## **Seniors helping seniors**

### **Knox County program pairs frail with healthy elderly**

*by Agatha Bardeel for Senior Living*

In Knoxville, seniors are helping seniors in a program conceived and run by the Knoxville - Knox County Community Action Committee Office on Aging. Called the Senior Companion Program, the program helps needy, often fragile senior adults by providing paid low-income helpers. These helpers, themselves over age 60, visit and assist older persons with their physical, mental and social needs. In operation since 1988, the Senior Companion Program pays those seniors who qualify as companions, a tax-free, hourly stipend of \$2.65, for a 20-hour week. They also are paid for holidays, vacation and sick days, just as if they were in the regular work force. In addition, they are paid for 40 hours of training, are provided with liability insurance while on the job and their mileage is reimbursed for their travel time. To qualify, companions must be at least 60 years old, and they must be in economic need themselves. That is, says Norma Bumgardner, who manages the program, their total monthly income must be at or near the poverty line, which is defined as \$923 a month for a household of one, \$1223 for a household of two. Bumgardner says that, the pay aside, companions derive personal meaning and satisfaction in being useful to their peers. But it is also much-needed extra cash. "This extra income, they really need it to live. For many of them, it pays for food." Bumgardner says the program provides a means of earning income that is not taxed and that will not threaten their eligibility for other government programs. "It is a good program for those who want something to do but who cannot get a real job, where they would lose their supplemental benefits." There are currently 140 in the Senior Companion Program, and more are needed and welcome, says Bumgardner. While you have to be a resident in Knox County to get a Senior Companion sent to your home, you do not have to live in Knox County to be one, she says. Companions give their clients personal care. They help with meal preparation, help them reorganize and manage their homes, give friendship and social interaction, and share recreational activities. The benefits to the companion, as well as their needy senior clients, are great, Bumgardner says. "People blossom. We see the change after only a few weeks of training. One of our companions, a woman, had been in an abusive relationship for years. She grew in our training program. She became so proud of herself to be doing something meaningful, to be busy, meeting people, and adding so much to their lives. "One thinks of the frail older person who is being helped, but the companion gets a lot out of this too. It can't just be the money, because it 's only \$10 a day." Bumgardner says her program has a waiting list of 150-175 people who

need companions. "So many people need a service of this kind, in order to be able to stay in their own homes. But they cannot afford it. At \$20-\$25 an hour, this kind of service is just too expensive." That makes this service, which is free to the frail elderly clients, so valuable, Bumgardner says. Some of the needy cases awaiting companions: "We know of one lady who is looking after a couple who are 96 and 98 years old. She is a distant relation. Both have some dementia. She badly needs one of our companions to help her." "Another woman is caring for her husband who is suffering both dementia and cancer. She also is looking after her 16-month-old grandchild. She needs one of our companions. "There are lots of 24-hour caregivers out there, pulling their hair out if they don ' t get some kind of help." The companions develop a strong sense of family within the program, Bumgardner says. "We become like their family. When they themselves are ill, we are among the first people they call. One of our companions has been with us for 14 years." She notes that the companions often have serious problems to deal with, so that the program aims to help both the fragile elderly clients and the companions who help them. "We consider them clients too," Bumgardner notes. "They may have family problems, adult children in prison, domestic conflicts, financial troubles. They may be barely getting by. If their mileage checks are late, they are in trouble." The program gives the companions .32 cents a mile for travel to and from the client home. The program asks companions to give the clients four hours, five days a week. They do 60 hours of orientation for a month before their work begins. There, companions hear speakers on such subjects as healthcare, nutrition, fire prevention, consumer fraud, and death and dying. "The companions love the classes," Bumgardner says. "They don ' t realize they learn so much and they really band together as a class, they become friends." Once a month, the program holds an in-service day for their companions, when everyone comes together to share and listen. Bumgardner says the program needs more men companions, as well as women. The current roster of 140 had just 15 men. Interested in becoming a companion? The Senior Companion Program office is located at 2247 Western Ave., PO Box 51650, Knoxville, TN 37950-1650. You can telephone them at 865-524-2786. ration, help them reorganize and manage their homes, give friendship and social interaction, and share recreational activities. The benefits to the companion, as well as their needy senior clients, are great, Bumgardner says. "People blossom. We see the change after only a few weeks of training. One of our companions, a woman, had been in an abusive relationship for years. She grew in our training program. She became so proud of herself to be doing something meaningful, to be busy, meeting people, and adding so much to their lives. "One thinks of the frail older person who is being helped, but the companion gets a lot out of this too. It can ' t just be the money, because it '

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