



OTSEGO COUNTY COMMISSION ON AGING



Submitted by
**Dale
Gehman**
DIRECTOR

120 Grandview Blvd., Gaylord, Michigan 49735

*We Help.
We Care*

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OCCOA Changing Along with Our Older Adults

In this space last month I discussed some of the issues that we are all facing with aging. The statistics as the Baby Boomers age past 60 are startling, and the impact on society, families, and the economy is real and will affect us for many years. The question for us at the OCCOA is what do we do about these changes? How do we adjust our offerings and programs to meet the financial, social, recreational, and educational needs of this growing group of older adults?

We are fortunate that our agency has a head start on many of these issues, in part because of the surveys that we have done. Respondents to our 2013 needs survey told us they want help most with Medicare/Medicaid, Medicare Part D supplemental insurance, and income tax filing. Although the federal government started the Medicare Medicaid Assistance Program (MMAAP) several years ago, it is typically staffed locally by part-time volunteers, if at all.

MMAAP!

At the OCCOA, we have an award-winning department staffed with five employees and one volunteer. The counselors, Loretta Miller, John Panci, Sara Skowronski, and Sandy Allison are busy year-round, but, in the fall busy season during Open Enrollment, this quartet assists several hundred clients looking for the right Medicare Part D drug plans.

So, what does that mean? In many cases, having the drug plan that best fits a client's particular needs may save hundreds or even thousands of dollars annually. That savings is crucial to area older adults who find themselves near or below the poverty line.

TAX ASSISTANCE!

The OCCOA Tax Assistance Program, managed by Volunteer Coordinator Eileen Godek and made possible by her team of specialists, has also helped hundreds of older adults annually file their tax returns. This, like MMAAP, helps them financially and reduces stress.



CONGREGATE MEALS!

Another important need the OCCOA works to address is socialization and social opportunities. A mainstay of that effort has been our Congregate Meal program, which encourages older adults to get out and enjoy a meal with old friends and make new friends. In the past year, we have increased the focus on special meals, offering a special-themed meal each month celebrating either ethnic food (Mexican, Hawaiian, German) or an upcoming holiday. The special meals add an element of fun and a party atmosphere with decorations, special menus, music, and prize drawings.

DINING OUT!

And yet, we know that the Congregate Meal program isn't everyone's ideal lunch, so we have been piloting our Dining Out program since July of 2013. Dining Out is a congregare meal program using area restaurants as the meal sites. Participants get meal coupons for a donation at the OCCOA office, and then redeem them for meals off of the OCCOA restaurant menu. Just recently, we expanded the program from our initial partner in Vanderbilt, the Mill Street Diner, to BJ's Restaurant in Gaylord. Participants get a dining experience at both restaurants that is different from our standard Congregate Meal, but there's still the opportunity to get out, share a nutritious meal with friends, and enjoy some social interaction.

BUS TRIPS!

Sometimes, though, you have to get farther out than a local restaurant, and that's also a need we are addressing. For the second time, we are taking three bus trips to watch the Tigers play in Comerica Park. The trips are all-in-one packages that include the game ticket, food, and transportation. We are also looking at more in-state day trips, as well as some partnering arrangements that would allow participants to experience events and places outside of Michigan.

RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES!

Closer to home, we offer our Educational Breakfast Series seminars and Free Fishing Day for socialization and recreation, and as well as the Young At Heart aerobics class for gals (and guys!) who are looking to get or stay fit. New for this summer we will offer bus transportation from selected sites for older adults to the Gaylord Farmer's Market in downtown Gaylord, which will give participants the chance to get outside in a fun, lively atmosphere, and buy some good things to eat.

COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY!

Our area's older adults have also shown a high interest in learning, especially about new technology. A few years ago we partnered with Michigan State University on the Technology and Aging (TAP) and TAP2 programs, in which we found that older learners like being taught technology by their peers. Since then, we've built a computer lab, offered a series of computer classes, and sponsored a computer club. The classes offer beginners and advanced users alike a chance to learn and grow their skills, and the club explores more advanced computer uses, as well as other devices like smart phones and MP3 players.

So, the answer is, we are doing a lot to keep up with all of these changes. Last month I used Bob Dylan's lyrics to talk about how our assumptions and expectations of older adults need to change, and above, I've covered some of the ways in which we have adjusted our offerings to meet their needs. Yes, of course, we still offer core services like:

- Home Delivered Meals
- In-Home Services
 - Personal Care, Respite, and Homemaking*
- Adult Day Services at Otsego Haus and we probably always will.

**BUT, THE TIMES, THEY ARE CHANGING...
AND SO ARE WE.**

989.732.1122 • www.OtsegoCountyCOA.org • Advocacy 989.732.9977

IN-HOME SERVICE ~ 989.705.2574 • MEAL PROGRAM ~ 989.732.1746 • SPECIAL EVENTS ~ 989.732.4702 • VOLUNTEER ~ 989.705.2572 • WEATHER ~ 989.731.5652

Fax: 989-731-2739 • occoa@occoaonline.org • Weekdays 8:30 am to Noon and 1:00 to 3:30 pm

120 GRANDVIEW BLVD. • GAYLORD, MICHIGAN 49735