

Friendly Visiting: Deep Connections Blossom from Weekly Visitation



Background

Loneliness and isolation endanger the health and wellness of older adults. Elders with limited social networks or who feel lonely may suffer worse mental and physical health, are twice as likely to develop Alzheimer's Disease, and have an increased risk of developing heart disease, high blood pressure, bad sleeping patterns, and worse cognition over time.

FriendshipWorks' Friendly Visiting program is an established companion matching program that addresses the needs of isolated seniors in Boston. The program screens, trains, and matches volunteers with elders. Volunteers visit and assist with tasks one friend might do for another, offering friendship as well as help with everyday tasks that keep life on track.

Project and Research Description

From 2010 to 2012, an in-depth assessment of the Friendly Visiting program and its effects on recipients and volunteers was completed by two Gerontology PhD students from the University of Massachusetts Boston.

The effectiveness and quality of the Friendly Visiting program was measured through surveys and qualitative interviews. All currently matched recipients were asked to report on their Friendly Visiting experience.

A series of companion fact sheets summarize the findings from this evaluation work. This fact sheet is second in the series and outlines the benefits an elder experiences from having a "successful match" - a volunteer/elder pairing that has lasted six months or more. Elders reported on the support they received from the program addressing the question:

What role do volunteers play in the life of their match and how does this benefit the elders?

Findings

During the data collection phase, 37 elders participating in the Friendly Visiting program were interviewed. For demographic information on who is served by the program, please see Friendly Visiting Fact Sheet No. 1.

The Friendship Connection

Over 94 percent of elders reported being "very satisfied" with the program and with their volunteer. When describing how they viewed the relationship, most people described their volunteer as a friend (40.5%), close or "best" friend (32.4%), or "like family" (27.0%). No one used a more clinical term, such as service provider, helper, aid, volunteer, and so on to describe how they viewed the individual visiting them.

Below are some descriptions, in the recipients' own words, that provide further insight into the friendships:

"Our relationship is beautiful, I look forward to seeing her. She is a lovely woman."

"It's like a mini-vacation when I go out with her. She is one of the most important people in my life now."

[Our relationship] "is very good, very friendly. To her, I'm like a mom away from home and to me, she is like a daughter. She is a blessing."

"Besides the difference in our ages, we just click. She is like another granddaughter."

Support Provided by Volunteers

Elders reported receiving a number of different types of assistance, although the program only requires the volunteer to visit and engage with the elder on a light and conversational level.



Program Fact Sheet

- **70.3%** reported the volunteer helped them be more socially engaged (get out in the community) and active (take walks)
- **51.4%** reported the volunteer helped them with errands (shopping) or transportation
- **24.3%** reported the volunteer assisted them with errands in the home, such as reading and paying bills, or cooking
- **18.9%** reported the volunteer helped with medical needs, such as getting to appointments or picking up prescriptions

Self-Reported Benefits of a Friendly Visitor

In addition to asking elders about instrumental support and problem solving, we asked whether they associate any personal life changes with having a volunteer in their life. Table 1 presents a list of the life changes asked in the survey and the percentage of elders who reported “yes” to having experienced the change.

All respondents reported at least one change, with 43 percent reporting 4 or more changes.

Table 1. Self-Reported Life Changes Associated with having a Friendly Visitor (n=37)	
Life Change	YES
“I now have someone in my life I can count on”	75.7%
“I feel less lonely”	62.2%
“I feel more connected to the outside world”	51.4%
“I feel more secure”	45.9%
“I am getting out of the house more”	40.5%
“I am exercising more”	29.7%
“I am taking better care of myself”	24.3%

Table 1 suggests that successfully matched elders report benefiting from the program. FriendshipWorks’ main mission (i.e. alleviating isolation and loneliness) is clearly being met by the frequency with which elders report “having someone to count on” and “feeling less lonely.”

When asked to elaborate on their answers, respondents focused primarily on the emotional benefits and socialization related to program participation. Elders felt cared for, and described a sense of trust and belonging:

“I really feel like I have gained a friend. I like to be myself, so I don’t open up to a lot of people.”

“I [now] have an uplifted spirit and a desire to want to try harder. I have more of a sense of worth.”

“I’m so much happier. [My volunteer] fills the void of having my family living so far away.”

“I can depend on him. I know he is going to show up and I can count on him.”

“After I fell outside and I never wanted to go out because of it. She got me out again.”

“She is the only friend I have that I can really talk to—and I trust her. It’s hard for me to trust.”

Conclusions

The weekly visits by FriendshipWorks’ Friendly Visitor volunteers are shown to build friendship among the participants involved. Elders are benefiting from having an increased social network and someone in their life they can count on. Moreover, the ongoing relationships build trust and a sense of familial bonds.

This Fact Sheet was created July 2013 and can be found at www.fw4elders.org