

**Visiting Neighbors' Testimony
for
New York State Assembly's Budget Hearing – FY 2021
Human Service - January 30th, 2020**

My name is Dr. Cynthia Maurer and I am the Executive Director of Visiting Neighbors, which has been serving our city's homebound and frail elderly since 1972. Visiting Neighbors, a non-profit organization, enables individuals age 60+ to remain independent and safe in their own homes and a vital part of the New York Community. Through programs of "neighbors helping neighbors," volunteers, supported by Visiting Neighbors' professional staff, help older adults alleviate loneliness and isolation, provide mental stimulation and emotional security, share information about wellness and health related concerns and encourage physical independence and quality of life at home. Visiting Neighbors champions the power of the volunteer and encourages interdependence – so that mutual learning and understanding bring generations together to share life experiences and gain respect for each individual's uniqueness. The organization promotes a positive acceptance of life after sixty and the value of the elderly in society.

We thank you for your previous support and we respectfully urge your continued support for our services to homebound and frail seniors.

Description of the Population we help:

Visiting Neighbors' clients are age 60 and over our eldest is 105, and average age is 89 (Just over a decade ago it was age 79). They tend to be frail and have one or more ailments. They are from all walks of life and backgrounds, but most live on fixed incomes and can't afford to pay for help. All of our clients are able to self-direct, however we have every personality type you can imagine and a few that are a bit offbeat or eccentric. The senior who comes to us usually lives alone, has little or no family nearby that they can turn to for help. Some have family that do not care. Some have family that care, but are not in a position to help. They are all proud and determined to remain independent and in their own homes. Most of their friends are either elderly and often frail themselves and not able to assist them or have passed. Before they come to us, the seniors are most often isolated and nervous about crossing the streets and getting to and from their appointments safely, frightened about health concerns, have little or poor communication with their doctors and need help with errands. Like any of us, they all want to be valued, understood and respected.

Our society too often overlooks the frail and the oldest old, the seniors 85+ who spend their days alone behind the confines of their apartments. They have lost their family and friends and cannot go to senior centers for companionship, stimulation or assistance. These seniors need human contact to help sustain their will to take care of themselves, eat or even live and to encourage them as they face the challenges of aging. They need someone to talk to, and also someone who can listen with a trained professional ear, someone who can connect them with the help they need and expresses that they care.

Visiting Neighbors is of the most cost-effective solutions to the needs of our frail and homebound seniors. We get the community involved. For the past 48 years, Visiting Neighbors has successfully mobilized community support for our seniors. As the number of seniors is growing dramatically, we need your support so we can be here for them, as well as continue to support our existing clients as they face the challenges of aging. We let them know they are not alone.

Loneliness and depression are major factors that contribute to many seniors' loss of independence. A senior who feels that he or she has little to live for may not eat right, may not see their doctors regularly, may not take their medicine, and they may not be aware of hazards in their apartment or when they go outside.

Visiting Neighbors' professional staff is dedicated to helping seniors who want to remain independent and part of our community. We reach out to find volunteers who visit our community's seniors, providing emotional support and mental stimulation, someone they can talk to about whatever is on their mind, enjoy a game of cards with, or watch a movie with, or share memories and life experiences. Our dedicated volunteer visitors provide extra eyes and ears for our staff, alerting us immediately of any change in a senior's condition so they can get help before an emergency arises. Volunteers often become like family to our seniors, celebrating birthdays and holidays with them, reassuring them that they have not been forgotten.

Our seniors are proud, and don't want to be a burden on anyone. They don't want to bother their family or their neighbors, and may neglect their health rather than asking for help, even for something simple. They are frightened, and they are vulnerable. We also encounter quite a bit of stubbornness and ego issues that get in the way of the senior engaging in safer behaviors. One example is insisting on using a shopping cart to lean on while walking on a street instead of a more stable walker. We never give up trying to communicate important messages. Ninety-three-year-old Maria, told staff she felt she looked "really old" using the walker outside. However, we finally got through to her when we changed our strategy. Instead of pointing out that she could fall as we had many, many times, we appealed to her vanity and let her know how proud we were of seniors when we see them using mobility devices that enable them to move around safely and viewed them as determined and "young" in spirit."

An Overview of our Core Services:

Friendly Visiting & Shop and Escort

Friendly Visitor Volunteers are matched with seniors based on mutual interests, hobbies, needs, etc. to either spend a couple of hours a week providing companionship and/or take seniors to and from medical appointments. Shop & Escort Volunteers also pick up seniors after medical procedures, take them to and from physical therapy, accompany them on walks, help with errands (such as escorts to/from banks, helping read mail, shopping, hair salons, social programs, rehabs, cemetery visits and escorting to/from Access-A-Ride renewal application centers.)

Health Advocacy

Our Health Advocate helps our existing clients better communicate with their doctors, as well as formulate key questions to ask medical professionals to ensure they understand instructions when leaving their offices (including how to take medications, what they are for, what to expect and side effects). Our Health Advocate and trained cadre of volunteers also encourages seniors to go to see their doctors in the first place, as well as advocate for them when they are going into the hospital or rehab. It always helps a patient to let medical personnel know someone is watching. When a senior comes home from a hospital, we are there to make sure they have what they need. We will pick up medications, go shopping and provide emotional reassurance and a chance to vent about their experience.

Caregiver Support

We receive calls from relatives who are anxious because their elderly family member has no one nearby to look in on them. Family members, friends and neighbors call because they want to help but don't know how. They are often nervous, exhausted and overwhelmed. They don't know what their senior needs, how to get them to accept help, how to manage the burden of care-giving, or how to engage the senior in a difficult conversation about what is going on and/or planning for what lies ahead. We talk to caregivers when they are overwhelmed, providing information and support. We work closely with other agencies that provide services to frail seniors, referring clients to them and accepting referrals from them. We are dedicated to making sure that our community's seniors get the help they need.

Student Nursing Program

Student nurses from the NYU Rory Meyers College of Nursing, under the guidance of their professor and Visiting Neighbors' staff discuss with our seniors; heart health, fall prevention, nutrition, staying flexible, advanced directives and many other wellness topics, as well as do medication reconciliation, hazard in home assessments and blood pressure screenings. Every student in our nursing program finishes their semester with a newfound appreciation for the challenges and struggles seniors face as they age. They leave as advocates for their care should they see an older adult neglected in a hospital setting.

Remembering Special Occasions

We remember and celebrate special occasions. Local school children make handmade birthday, Valentines and other holiday cards. We are starting a pen pal program with some of the seniors and students. We work with another organization that prepares meals for the Thanksgiving holiday for our seniors. Our volunteers deliver the meals. In the month of December, we had volunteers put together care packages of donated items such as stationery, magnifiers, toothbrushes with tooth paste, moisturizer, hand sanitizer, lip balm, packet tissues, pens, socks, tote bags. Volunteers later deliver these packages to clients during the holiday season, which can often be a time that is especially lonely for seniors who otherwise have no one to share in the joys of the season with.

Wellness Programs

We plan on having more free public wellness events in the coming fiscal year to engage seniors and volunteers in group discussions and wellness activities/ programs. All are welcome. The workshops and discussions will include the following topics:

- stretching/chair exercises/staying flexible
- stress management
- nutrition/incorporating super foods
- the importance of staying connected with others
- staying strong as the seniors face physical changes/venting frustrations in healthy ways
- beating the blues
- fall prevention
- advanced directives
- communicating more effectively with medical professionals
- mental stimulation through games and conversation
- emergency preparedness
- heart health
- pedestrian safety

Some Demographics of our clients:

*77% are female, 22% are male and 1% define themselves as non-binary.

*90 % live alone

*75% of our clients are over 80 and 33% are over 90.

*98% percent of our clients can neither pay for private services, nor eligible for Medicaid. We do not collect further socio-economic info as we help individuals regardless of their finances or status. The data we collect comes from what seniors choose to share and we help individuals regardless of their finances or their ability to contribute. There are no fees for our services. We depend on contributions and grants to sustain our efforts.

*73% are homebound, but can get outside with assistance and 4% are bedbound

* Last year our Centenarian Club had fifteen members. We lost two of them, but we celebrated them while they were here, and we have two more seniors turning 100 this spring.

Visiting Neighbors' addresses the following needs of seniors in our community:

1. Seniors will be less lonely, know they are not alone and have someone they can turn to, will be less depressed and isolated.
2. Seniors will have better communications with their health professionals, ask important questions, will be better informed about their illnesses, ailments and diseases, take their medications as instructed and follow up with their appointments.
3. Seniors will get their shopping done as well as other vital errands done so they can retain their independence, remain in their homes and not be forced into a nursing home.
4. Seniors will be safely walking outside and avoiding potential street hazards.
5. To celebrate special occasions like birthdays and holidays with clients.

6. To have seniors better informed on a variety of wellness issues and get them asking more questions.
7. To reach to a larger number of seniors who could benefit from our services.
8. To identify and engage more volunteers.
9. To foster better understanding and communications between student interns, volunteers and seniors' so they can appreciate each other more.
10. Educating the general public to be have a greater understanding of our seniors needs in the community to age-in-place and hopefully become more sensitive towards those needs.
11. We also will keep having conversations going with seniors, caregivers and other caring individuals on difficult topics such as being prepared in case of a personal emergency, leaving a legacy and end of life conversations

In closing, as you consider the needs of New York City, please do not turn your back on one of our most vulnerable populations: the frail elderly and the oldest old. Visiting Neighbors needs your continued support, and seniors needs more programs like Visiting Neighbors.

Visiting Neighbors has earned a reputation as a trusted lifeline for our frail elderly and for caregivers. We are a cost-effective solution that makes our community a better place for seniors and for those who care about them.

We are a small group with a big impact. We are requesting that you include us in your budget(s) so that we can continue to do our vital work.

Thank you for your consideration and attention.

Testimony submitted by:

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