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## Valley Neighbors growing strong in South Franklin County



Gale Mason, Nancy Maynard and President Fran Fortino of the Valley Neighbors group, covering Deerfield, Sunderland and Whately. CONTRIBUTED

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Once a week, Whately resident Carlotta Thackeray takes a few hours to go to doctor's appointments, shop for groceries or weed the garden. The twist, however, is these are not for herself, but for elderly residents of South Franklin County through the Valley Neighbors

organization.

After a year of helping the seniors of Deerfield, Sunderland and Whately take care of errands or their homes, Valley Neighbors is seeking to expand its services in its second year. The organization serves folks aged 60 and older, who may need some extra support so they may stay in their homes. Anyone living in the three towns is eligible to register or volunteer to provide services.

“I love doing it and the people are wonderful,” Thackeray said. “Everybody is so appreciative of what we do.”

Valley Neighbors Board of Directors President Fran Fortino and fellow board member Nancy Maynard said their first year has been successful with 83 members signed up, with about a third of those members receiving services.

“We’ve had a really tremendous year since we went live. The communities in southern Franklin County have an increasing population of elderly,” Fortino said. “And almost all of those people want to remain in their communities and their homes and they realized they need a little bit of support to do so.”

Due to the rural nature of Franklin County, Maynard said transportation for shopping or medical appointments are their most popular requests — most rides are 20 miles or more — but Valley Neighbors also provides light home care, such as household chores or lawn care, or socialization services for elderly residents whose families may live far away or have work obligations.

Examples of work volunteers have done include potting plants, changing smoke detectors or putting together a wardrobe, which Maynard said “may be commonplace to you or I, but are really significant to somebody else.”

Since last year, Maynard said Valley Neighbors volunteers have driven more than 4,000 miles and provided 370 hours’ worth of service, all at no cost for members.

When it launched in February 2022, the Valley Neighbors joined several other villages in the Pioneer Valley, which include Neighbors at Home in Northfield; the Village Neighbors in Leverett, Shutesbury, New Salem and Wendell; as well as the Amherst and Northampton Neighbors.

The Village Movement is a grassroots idea that began with the Beacon Hill Village in Boston about 20 years ago and has since spread to more than 300 communities across the country and

the world, according to the Beacon Hill Village's website.

As it moves into its second year, Fortino said the focus is on bringing in more volunteers, particularly in Deerfield because that's where most of their members are located, as well as continuing to build up partnerships with the South County Senior Center and the Northwestern district attorney's office.

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"I encourage anybody who is interested in giving back to their community in some small way," Fortino said. "This is a perfect way to get involved and give back to their neighbors."

Volunteers are provided with a "substantial training" where they are educated on aspects of aging and proper responses to potential scenarios if something were to come up while they are working. They must also provide two references, go through a background check and identify which areas of work they are interested in, as well as some sense of their availability.

"A key interest in helping their neighbors and giving back is very useful," Fortino said, noting there often aren't opportunities for people to do that. "A lot of people have that and don't have an outlet."

Thackeray, who is retired, said her time volunteering has been completely positive and while it's only up to a few hours a week, it's a fulfilling experience. She added most of her volunteering has taken place in South Deerfield.

"It giving me something to do because I like to stay busy," Thackeray said. "I know that I'm helping people, along with their families ... it gives them a break as well."

Volunteers can work as little or as much as they like.

To register as a member, folks must be over the age of 60 and live in Deerfield, Sunderland or Whately. They also have to fill out an application and go through a short interview so Valley Neighbors can get core information about the person so their needs can be assessed.

Fortino said there are no membership fees, as Valley Neighbors is funded by donations and grants in an effort to remove any barriers from seniors receiving services.

To register as either a volunteer or member, people can call 413-453-9057 or visit [valleyneighbors.org](https://valleyneighbors.org) (<https://valleyneighbors.org/>).

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