

# Northampton Neighbors lands 1st grant to expand program of helping seniors

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NORTHAMPTON — Northampton Neighbors, a nonprofit dedicated to helping seniors improve their quality of life and stay in their homes, has received its first grant.

"We are thrilled with this award," said Leigh Bailey, a founder and former president of Northampton Neighbors, who does publicity for the nonprofit.

"We're very, very excited about it," said Northampton Neighbors President Katharine Baker, who helped write the grant.

Launched last fall, Northampton Neighbors connects seniors in the city with volunteers who can help them with tasks ranging from buying groceries, chopping wood and keeping them company. This kind of assistance is referred to as a virtual retirement village.

The yearlong, \$6,000 grant from the Community Foundation of Western Massachusetts is designed to help Northampton Neighbors reach low-income and ethnically diverse seniors.

"This grant gives us the opportunity to do more effective outreach," Baker said.

She said one requirement of the grant is to boost membership by at least 50 people from underserved neighborhoods in the city.

Northampton Neighbors currently has almost 450 members and more than 60 volunteers, with all volunteers having been both trained and checked for CORI, or criminal offender record information.

Baker said Northampton Neighbors includes members who both volunteer and receive services. Not all members are seniors either. Currently Northampton Neighbors has one paid staffer, and all its previous funds have come from donations.

All Northampton residents aged 55 years or older are eligible for Northampton Neighbor's services. Before any services are delivered, however, a volunteer comes to the person's house and evaluates them to determine their needs.

The services are free of charge, and Bailey said that transportation is the most popular among them.

"That's what most people need," she said, while noting that Northampton Neighbors likes trips to be scheduled three days in advance.

Former Northampton Senior Services Director Linda Desmond is serving as the volunteer coordinator for the organization.

Baker said the reason the organization doesn't charge a fee, unlike many other virtual retirement villages, is to make it more accessible.

Northampton Neighbors is based at the Northampton Senior Center, and Northampton Senior Services Director Marie Westerborg said that its mission is very important to the city's seniors.

"We have shared goals," Westburg said.

She expects there will be a lot of collaboration between the Senior Center and Northampton Neighbors in reaching out to isolated and marginalized seniors.

"I'm looking forward to this project," she said.

Bailey also said that Northampton Neighbors is interested in doing outreach in communities outside of the city. "It'll be down the line," she said. "But hopefully."

Baker said that she has been doing mentorship with people organizing virtual retirement villages in other nearby communities.

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