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Want to improve your health in 2019? Volunteer!

Since 2004, Catholic Charities' Common Good Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) has engaged more than 1,000 volunteers who serve thousands of people in southern Minnesota day-in and day-out. Together, they are building better lives for their neighbors by addressing gaps in services related to affordable housing, independent living for seniors, intergenerational connections, affordable food and economic security. Now, new research demonstrates that the volunteers themselves are enjoying health benefits because of their service!

Common Good RSVP, a Senior Corps Program, is overseen by the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), a federal agency for service, volunteering and civic engagement. In 2015, CNCS launched two longitudinal studies to look at the health benefits of volunteering for older adults. Researchers found:

- Almost two-thirds of Senior Corps volunteers reported a decrease in feelings of isolation, and 67 percent of those who first reported they "often" lack companionship stated that they had improved social connections.
- Seventy percent of volunteers who initially reported five or more symptoms of depression reported fewer symptoms at the end of the first year.

"These preliminary findings support a larger body of research that highlights the positive impact of volunteering, particularly for older adults, and are a valuable addition to the conversation on healthy aging," according to CNCS spokesperson Samantha Jo Warfield. "Senior Corps volunteers are deeply dedicated to the communities they serve, committed to a single organization, often for several years, developing intensive and ongoing relationships with those they serve."

Common Good RSVP has numerous stories about volunteers whose lives were improved by the program, including Nancy & Wayne Dunbar (Winona, MN). The Dunbars volunteer at a Community Meal Site, the Winona Area Warming Center and have worked with Habitat for Humanity as a builder, among many other community volunteer positions. Their volunteerism is driven by the satisfaction of helping others and the benefits others receive because of their efforts. Many of the guests that enjoy the Community Meal site are thankful for the meal they receive, as it may be the only one they get in a days' time. The most rewarding aspect of their volunteerism is knowing that they are making life better for someone else. Both believe that they are not here to judge others, but to provide an opportunity to make someone's life better-whether through a nutritious meal, a safe place to sleep or a building a home for them. They both feel that helping others is the right thing to do. Their return on investment comes from the pride and gratitude they receive from those they help, whether it is a simple thank you or a friendly smile when they pass by someone while out and about in the community. Volunteerism provides opportunities to meet new people, to learn and to help find answers. Nancy and Wayne are 84 and 86 years old, respectively, and both find that by volunteering and giving to others,

they focus less on their own aches and pains. Nancy said, “If you are looking outward, you will be happier than dwelling within.”

Similarly, the Catholic Charities’ Health and Wellness Programs provide an opportunity for increased activity, engagement and social connections. Peggy Milewski (Faribault, MN) is a Powerful Tools for Caregivers (PTC) Leader. Peggy attended a PTC class held by Catholic Charities, looking for support, while her husband had cancer. She was an overwhelmed caregiver who had a strong, but small circle of support, and like other caregivers, Peggy felt isolated and was exhausted providing care around the clock every day. She quickly learned through the class that she was not super human, that she needed help and support and that she needed to pace herself, while caring for her husband’s needs. She learned that accepting help is not a weakness, but a strength because you are acknowledging your limits. Peggy immediately experienced and saw through others how helpful the workshop was and she immediately knew that she needed to be trained to lead the program, in order to help others. The workshop provided hope, courage and helped her want to persevere. She knew that the courage she had learned through the workshop could be an inspiration to others. Peggy has found that volunteering as a PTC workshop leader has provided hope and relief to others. Her energy and belief in the value of caregiver health radiates to the participants in the program. She is filled with gratitude because she is helping others and providing hope in situations that can seem overwhelming. She is expanding her volunteerism to lead yoga classes because she recognizes the value of her own health and well-being and believes that through these opportunities she will be healthier.

Sylvia Hewitt-Hoehn (Mankato, MN) has led a Stay Active and Independent for Life (SAIL) exercise class two times a week since 2013. After having been a participant in the class, she says she was “wrangled” into leading a class and felt nervous, but she decided to take the plunge. Sylvia had a brain tumor when she was young and struggled to keep up academically with her brothers and sisters in her family of eight. Because of that challenge, she has a personal mantra that when she decides to do something, she will work hard to do it well. Sylvia first became involved with SAIL as a participant. Right off the bat she spotted a gentleman that she thought was cute, so her friend put her bag down on the chair next to him. They sparked a friendship and eventually began have coffee after SAIL classes on a regular basis with him and others. That social aspect was a big boost for Sylvia, as she had lost her husband 8 years prior. Eventually, Sylvia, and the man she was fond of in her SAIL class dated and were married 4 years later! Sylvia has chronic health issues that she manages. She has fibromyalgia, so she needs the class to feel well. She has found many days when it is hard to go lead the class because of her health condition, but she always feels better- physically and mentally after classes. She feels good to see other people benefit from the class. A 90-year old participant had a stroke, and the doctor encouraged this person to participate in SAIL. Sylvia has seen dramatic improvements in the participants’ mobility and physical condition. It’s the satisfaction and joy she feels from seeing

people's health improve and receiving positive feedback from the participants about how much they appreciate the class "makes me feel so good," Sylvia commented.

Americans are living longer than ever and achieving even more, and choosing to take on new roles after decades of hard work and reaping the health benefits of their ongoing contributions to the common good.

We believe that everyone deserves to contribute to the common good and age well.

Visit our website to learn more about how we can help you contribute to the common good and participate in our health and wellness programs.

Common Good RSVP: <https://www.ccsomn.org/active-aging-programs/common-good-rsvp/>

Health and Wellness Programs:

<https://www.ccsomn.org/active-aging-programs/wellness-programs/>

If we do not currently offer the program or opportunity you are interested in, our team can work with you to offer it in your community.