

Senior Services

OF ALEXANDRIA



Evaluation – Friendly Visitor Program

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Executive Summary

The Friendly Visitor Program (“the Program”) provides social interaction, and relieves loneliness and feelings of isolation in senior citizens who are lonely or home-bound in the City of Alexandria. The Program is based on extensive research that has shown depression and loneliness to be major problems that lead to impaired quality of life among elderly persons, and that there are considerable health benefits of socialization. Since September, 2012 the Program has recruited volunteers who visit seniors each week. A total of 248 seniors and homebound residents have been enrolled in the Program since its inception in 2012. This is the second evaluation of the impact of the Program on the seniors it serves and the Alexandria citizens who volunteer as the Program’s friendly visitors.

A total of 27/36 (75%) one-to-one interviews with a standardized interview guide were conducted with the seniors who had participated in the Program for one year or more. Interviews were conducted either on-site (residents of facilities), or by telephone (seniors who live independently). The most frequent activities were talking (“about anything and everything”) and telling stories, although the visitors and seniors enjoyed many different activities together such as listening to music, playing cards, and walking outside. The seniors have developed very close friendships with their visitors, and they report great enjoyment from the regular visits, which they look forward to each week. Having a caring visitor helped the seniors feel less isolated and more hopeful about their lives.

A total of 23 visitors who volunteered in the Program for more than a year completed the evaluation e-survey. The visitors’ report of the activities they shared with their senior mirrored the seniors’ reports. The visitors reported being changed by the experience of being a visitor – feeling very satisfied and happy about bringing a little joy to a senior’s life; enjoying new, interesting friendships; and gaining a new appreciation for the aging process, the needs of the elderly who are disabled and isolated, and the worth of good health.

In conclusion, the Friendly Visitor Program of Alexandria continues to successfully identify seniors in Alexandria who could benefit from having a regular visitor, and a group of dedicated friendly visitors who visit those seniors every week. This social interaction has had profound, positive psychosocial effects on both the seniors who are served by the Program and the citizens who visit them.

History of the Program

From 2000 – 2009, the Friendly Visitor Program in Alexandria was operated by the local Red Cross chapter. The successful program, with over 70 volunteers who visited 50 seniors on a regular basis, was discontinued in 2009 due to changes in funding directives from the national Red Cross organization.

In 2012, a task force was formed to evaluate the feasibility of resurrecting the Friendly Visitor Program under the direction of Senior Services of Alexandria (SSA). The task force concluded that the program would fill an unmet need in the City of Alexandria and would support SSA's goal of improving the lives of seniors in our community.

The Friendly Visitor Program (hereafter referred to as “the Program”) provides social interaction, and relieves loneliness and feelings of isolation in senior citizens who are lonely, home-bound, and without many friends or family members in the local area. The Program's goal is to provide isolated seniors in Alexandria with a new sense of community and connection. The Program matches seniors who are isolated or homebound with fellow citizens who are committed to the elderly, want to share interests and establish friendships with them, and who make a commitment to visiting the seniors on a regular, weekly basis to build a friendly relationship.

The previous (and first) evaluation of the Program, conducted in 2015, found that those who volunteer as “friendly visitors” experience great satisfaction in knowing that they are making a difference in the life of a lonely, elderly resident. The visitors also reported that their own lives were enriched by the genuine friendship they shared with their senior, and that they developed new insights into the many challenges of the aging process. The seniors in the Program reported that having a regular visitor who cared about them made a real, positive difference in their lives.

The Program is based on 25 years of extensive research that have shown that 1) depression and loneliness are major problems that lead to impaired quality of life; 2) living alone and social isolation are detrimental to health and result in a greater likelihood of mortality; and 2) that for seniors, there are significant health benefits from socialization and connection with others.

The most recent research on loneliness, conducted by researchers at the University of California San Diego School of Medicine (Lee et al., 2018) and published in the December 2018 issue of *International Psychogeriatrics* included 340 adults between 27 - 101 years of age (mean = 62 years) who were asked about feelings of isolation, which were measured by a number of standardized surveys including the well-known UCLA

Loneliness Scale The subjects in the study did not have major physical or psychiatric illnesses, or diagnosed dementia; lived in the community and not in nursing homes; and did not require substantial assistance with activities of daily living.

The researchers found that:

- Loneliness was more prevalent than the research team had expected. Three-fourths of study participants reported moderate to high levels of loneliness.
- Although moderate to severe loneliness persisted across the adult lifespan, the loneliness was worst at three particular life stages: the late-20s, mid-50s, and late-80s.
- Loneliness was correlated with worse mental health and inversely with positive psychological states.
- Even moderately severe loneliness was associated with worse mental health and physical functioning.

The research team concluded that “the alarmingly high prevalence of loneliness and its association with worse health-related measures underscore major challenges for society.”

Under the direction of SSA, the Program began recruiting volunteers in September, 2012. The first volunteer/senior match was made in October, 2012. Since that time, the Program has continued to recruit committed friendly visitors and to match them with senior citizens in Alexandria who could benefit from having a regular visitor.

Program Evaluation

Rationale and Purpose

As the sponsor of the Program, SSA is obligated to evaluate the value/worth of the Program to those it serves – seniors of Alexandria who are isolated and home-bound. Beyond meeting this obligation, SSA also needs rigorous evaluation data to remain competitive in obtaining grants that will provide continued funding for the Program.

This evaluation, the second evaluation of the Program, was designed to assess the impact of the Program on the homebound seniors it serves and the group of dedicated Alexandria’s citizens who serve as friendly visitors in the Program.

Target Groups

A target group defines the individuals or groups who were included in the program evaluation and describes why they were a focus of the evaluation. In this evaluation, there were two target groups:

Who?	Why?
Homebound seniors who are residents of the City of Alexandria	Are the primary beneficiaries of the Friendly Visitor Program
Volunteers who serve as friendly visitors and who reside in the City of Alexandria	Serve as the visitors for homebound seniors in the Program

Data Collection

Triangulation was used to ensure the overall rigor and credibility of the evaluation. This well-recognized, practical strategy has its origins in land surveying which used two or more points of reference to determine a third (Patton, 2015). Rigor in evaluation is strengthened by using “multiples” - made possible by different types of triangulation - that provide a more complete, less biased picture, more synergistic utilization of data, and an increase in a study’s validity. Each type of triangulation contributes somewhat differently to the overall depth and breadth of an evaluation by adding different sources with different points of view (such as visitors and seniors), different but complementary types of data collected with different methods (such as an on-line survey with both quantitative and qualitative data, and one-to-one interviews), and multiple data collectors and analysts.

The types of triangulation employed in this evaluation included:

- *Multiple sources of data*
 - Friendly visitors and seniors served by the program
 - SSA
- *Multiple data collection methods*
 - *Descriptive data* – summary data on participation rates, provided by SSA
 - *Interviews* – One-to-one interviews with seniors using a standardized interview guide (**Attachment A**). Interviews were conducted on-site at multiple nursing facilities by Dr. Diane Stoy; interviews with seniors who lived independently at home were conducted by telephone.

- *Visitor survey* – Under the direction of Mr. Quang Le, ACC, MSOD, a recognized expert in survey methodology, the visitor survey (**Attachment B**) was adapted and distributed through the on-line Survey Monkey platform. The deadline to respond to the survey was extended twice in an attempt to increase the survey response rate. The Survey Monkey platform was an efficient, cost-effective means of collecting both quantitative data (hours spent each week; types of activities shared with the homebound senior) and qualitative data (the effect of being a visitor on the visitor themselves). In the previous evaluation, the latter reflected Rogers (1966) seminal concept of reciprocity in therapeutic relationships, which suggests that helping others has benefits for the helper as well.
- *Multiple data collectors and analysts*
 - The research team was lead by Dr. Diane Stoy, who with collaborator Mr. Quang Le, collected and analyzed the evaluation data.
 - An attempt was made to recruit gerontology students from George Mason University to participate in the evaluation. With the cooperation of the George Mason Gerontology Faculty, we offered extra class credit for any student who was interested in being involved in the evaluation process. Unfortunately, we were unable to recruit any student volunteers to join the research team.

Constraints

There were several constraints inherent in this evaluation:

1. *Cognitive capacity of the seniors in the Program* – Since overall health and cognitive function vary among seniors, some may be unable to remember or to articulate their experience of having a regular visitor in their daily lives. Five seniors were excluded from the interview: three due to diminished cognitive capacity; one due to hospitalization; and one due to a severe hearing impairment.
2. *The complexities of aging* - Since aging is a complex process, it is difficult to isolate the effect of having a visitor for 1-2 hours per week from the other variables in a senior's daily life.

Data analysis

The quantitative data were analyzed to describe the seniors in the Program, the extent of activity in the Program such as visits per week, and the specific activities shared by

the friendly visitor and the senior they visit. The qualitative survey and interview data were analyzed with standard content analysis by theme with selected quotes.

Communication of results

The findings of this evaluation will be used by SSA for required reporting, grant writing, and publicizing the program in local and national publications.

Results

Descriptive Data

The following participation data reflect two critical periods in the Program's evolution: Period 1 (inception to the first program evaluation: 9/2012 – 4/2015) and Period 2 (the post-evaluation period from 4/2015 to the present).

In this data analysis, "active" is defined as a resident who is enrolled in the Program and has been assigned a visitor. "No longer in the Program" includes residents who have died, moved away from the area, and those who are no longer interested in the Program. This last group includes some residents who no longer have their original visitor and who did not wish to be assigned a new visitor.

Period	Total Enrolled	Total Active	No Longer in Program
1 (9/2012 – 4/2015)	128	73 (57%)	55 (43%)
2 (4/2015 to present)	120	50 (42%)	70 (58%)

Interviews - Seniors

A total of 36 seniors who participated in the Program for one year or more were eligible for interviews. Nine were excluded from the interview: three due to diminished cognitive capacity; one due to hospitalization; one due to a severe hearing impairment; and four who lived at home and did not answer their telephone after multiple attempts.

A total of 27 (75%) of the eligible seniors completed the interview – 20 (74%) women and 7(26%) men. The age range was 38 to 105 years, with an average age of 84 years (with the three younger clients - age 38, 46, and 58 - omitted from the calculation).

Activities. As shown below in Figure 1, the seniors reported that talking was the primary activity they shared with their visitor.

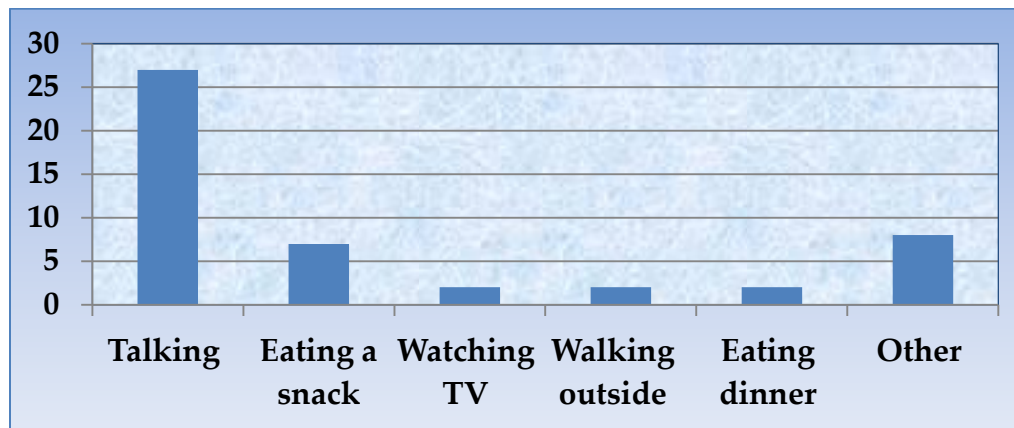


Figure 1: Seniors' Activity Report.

Activities also included eating a snack or dinner together, watching television, walking outside, playing cards ("fun"!), looking at the garden and art exhibit, playing board games, and going shopping.

Impact of having a visitor. The comments from the current seniors in the Program (**Attachment C**) are strikingly similar to those reported in the previous evaluation, conducted five years ago. The seniors reported many positive effects of having a visitor – they have developed very close friendships with their visitors ("She is like my family"), and they report great enjoyment, joy, and happiness from the visits, which they look forward to each week. "It's wonderful," said one senior, "...it opens up the day...gives me something to look forward to." Said another, "It has been an unexpected joy – it seems unreal because it's so joyful – listening to music together. She is like an angel. The program is like a little miracle." Another senior said it simply "I like having a friend and everybody needs a friend – I have no family in the area." And another said...."The truth is that because if they didn't come, I wouldn't have anyone here. Somedays, I'm going crazy because I am so lonesome. My visitor is a gem."

The seniors truly appreciate the regularity of the visits ("She is faithful, comes every week on Tuesday at 12 noon"), which they eagerly anticipate and which they greatly miss when their visitor is unable to visit ("I miss her when she travels."). Although some visitors assist the seniors with routine activities (such as taking out the trash, helping with unpacking and organizing, and shopping), the most valued activity shared by the seniors and their visitors was talking.

As one senior said, “We talk about anything and everything – it keeps you going.” The seniors appreciated that their visitors were interested in their ideas. “He is interested in what I have to say about life,” said one man, who reported being “totally uninterested” in the programs offered at the facility where he lived. Another woman said, “We talk about things that I like and she answers my questions.” In addition, one senior pointed out the value of sharing inter-generational perspectives (“She is a young person with different perspectives.”), while another said “...It brings back memories - it’s a good time reminiscing.”

An important feature of the relationship between some seniors and their visitors was a shared, common interest. For one woman, this was international travel and for others, love of classical opera, love of dogs, the fun of playing card games (rummy), and the shared history of growing up in the same state.

The seniors’ spirits have been uplifted by the regular visits (“I feel happy when she leaves”), and they report feeling more hopeful about the future. “This has made a big difference and given me something to look forward to,” said one woman, while another said “...it reminds me that there are other things going on.” As one woman, a former nurse who had traveled extensively in the past, said “...It gives me a chance to just touch the world other than being in here.”

Survey Responses – Friendly Visitors

A total of 23/48 (48%) visitors who had participated in the Program for more than one year completed the evaluation e-survey. Most of the visitors (8/22) joined the Program in 2018, while others had been volunteering since 2017(4), 2016(1), 2015(6), 2014 (2), and 2013 (1). All but two visitors visited their senior every week; one visited three times per month, and the other two to three times a week.

Activities. Shown below in Figure 2 is the visitors’ report of the activities they shared with their senior.

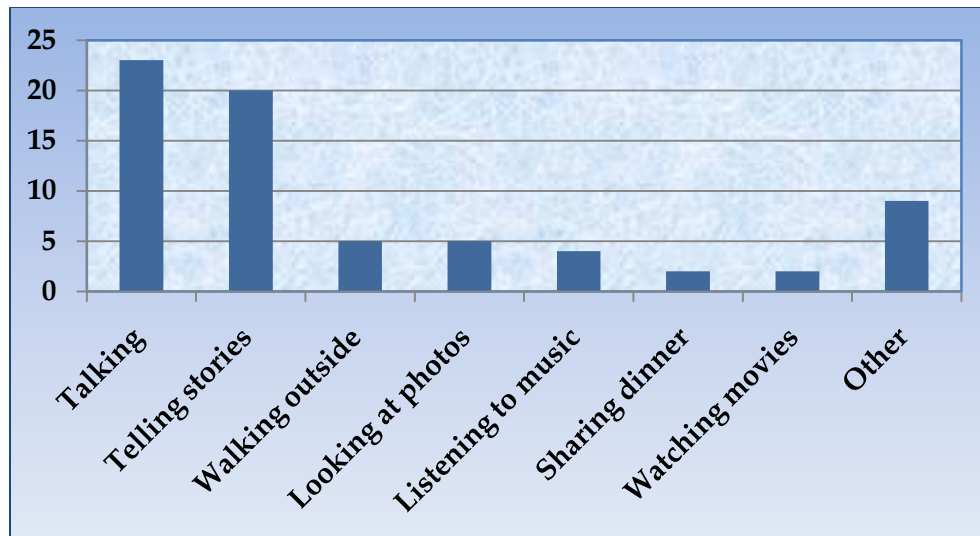


Figure 1: Visitors' activity report.

All visitors reported that talking was the primary activity they shared with their senior. Telling stories was a major focus in their conversations. Other activities includes going for a walk outside, looking at photos, listening to music, sharing dinner or a snack together, and watching a movie. Miscellaneous activities in the "other" category included working on a computer, reading, doing arts and crafts, playing cards, watching television, providing a manicure, and holding and petting a dog, which the visitor brought to the facility.

Impact of serving as a visitor. The most profound response from the friendly visitors was elicited by the final survey question which asked.... "How has being a visitor in the Friendly Visitor Program affected you? As reported verbatim in **Attachment D**, the visitors responded to this question with detailed descriptions of the Program's powerful impact.

The visitors reported that that they experienced very positive feelings about being a visitor and helping others. As one visitor said, " It makes you feel good to give back to other people who cannot do for themselves and share with other patients who look forward to talk to you and tell you their stories of they just happy that someone cares about them to talk and encourage them." Another said....."I love it! Brings me a lot of satisfaction knowing that I can make my friend's day a little better." One visitor added....." [It] brought a new friend into my life; allowed me to be useful and helpful to someone who needs a dependable friend."

Being a regular visitor also increased the visitors' awareness and sensitivity to issues related to aging. One visitor said that... "I have a new appreciation for the difficulties

associated with social isolation, and with physical and mental limitations,” while another commented that “...It has made me more aware of the loneliness seniors can experience.” Another visitor added that being a visitor “...Made me feel more connected to my community; provided me an opportunity to learn about the area from someone who has lived here for many years; and made think twice about the way I interact about seniors I meet on a daily basis.”

There were other benefits to serving as a visitor. The experience forged “genuine and rewarding friendship” between one visitor and her senior, and as another visitor said...”It has made me think about others - helped me to be less self absorbed.” The visitors benefitted from the friendship...”Both my seniors have led interesting lives, and I get back much more love than I can give.” It “made me happy,” said one visitor, while others noted that “It has affected me in a positive way. I feel like I have made a new friend who is amazing to hang out with,” and “....My family and I have formed a strong bond with my senior, and it has enriched all of our lives.”

Finally, one visitor’s comments summarized what Rogers (1967) described so long ago about reciprocity in helping relationships, i. e., that by helping others, the helper is also helped. As the visitor said....”It brought two wonderful women in my life - kind of like mother figures since I lost my mother at a young age. It has been such a blessing to know them and become friends with them. Has enriched my life immensely.”

Conclusion

Since its inception, the Friendly Visitor Program has successfully identified and recruited homebound, isolated seniors in the City of Alexandria who could benefit from having a regular visitor, and a cadre of dedicated friendly visitors who have visited those seniors every week for at least one year.

Interviews with the seniors in the Program revealed many positive effects from having a dedicated visitor who became a helpful friend and, in many cases, like a family member. The seniors have developed very close friendships with their visitors, and they report great enjoyment, joy, happiness from the regular visits, which they look forward to each week. They appreciate the visitors’ help with routine activities which would not be possible without extra assistance, and they truly value discussing shared interests with their visitors. The seniors’ spirits have been uplifted by the visits, and they report feeling more hopeful. Many seniors view their visitor as a best friend, a family member, and an important person in their lives.

Survey responses showed that during their weekly visits, the visitors shared a variety of activities with their seniors. The most profound finding was the effect of this experience on the visitors, many of whom are senior citizens who reside in Alexandria. As described by Rogers in 1967, the visitors reported that by helping others, they were helped themselves. The visitors reported powerful changes in their perceptions of their knowledge of the needs of the elderly, the devastating effect of loneliness and isolation, the importance of giving back to your community, the satisfaction that comes from helping others, and the joyfulness that can be realized from the small things in life.



Interview guide – Seniors

NAME: _____ AGE: _____ GENDER: ___M___F

LOCATION _____

DATE: _____

(INTRO - We are currently evaluating the impact of the Friendly Visitor Program. Since a Friendly Visitor visits you on a regular basis, we'd like to know what you do with your visitor and how that visit/relationship has affected you. Let's start with the activities.)

1. What type of activities do you share with your Friendly Visitor?

- a. _____ Talking
- b. _____ Listening to music
- c. _____ Walking outside
- d. _____ Reading
- e. _____ Providing manicures
- f. _____ Looking at photos
- g. _____ Playing cards
- h. _____ Playing board games like Scrabble, Dominos, Candyland
- i. _____ Working on a computer
- j. _____ Telling stories
- k. _____ Watching movies
- l. _____ Doing exercises with the Wii
- m. _____ Holding and petting an animal
- n. _____ Doing arts and crafts
- o. _____ Sewing

- p. _____ Painting
- q. _____ Knitting/crocheting
- r. _____ Paying bills
- s. _____ Other activities (please list):

2. How has having a regular visitor from the Friendly Visitor Program affected you?

Thank you for your help!



This survey has been sent to you because you serve as a visitor in the Friendly Visitor Program, which is sponsored by Senior Services of Alexandria. As part of our continuous improvement efforts, we are now conducting the second evaluation of the Friendly Visitor Program. As a visitor, your perspectives on the Program are very important and we welcome your honest feedback. All responses from visitors will be included *anonymously* and *without editing* in the final evaluation report – no names will be included.

Please complete the survey below, and return to us no later than Thursday, January 31, 2019.

On behalf of the evaluation team, thank you in advance for your feedback.

Sincerely,

Dr. Diane Stoy & Mr. Quang Le, ACC, MSOD
Evaluation consultants



Survey – Friendly Visitors

Thank you for your participation in the Friendly Visitor Program, and for your help with this evaluation. Please respond to the following questions:

3. When did you join the Friendly Visitor Program? (Please provide month and year): _____
4. How often do you visit your senior? _____
5. What type of activities do you share with the senior you visit? (Please check all that apply and add others in the space provided below.)
 - a. _____ Talking
 - b. _____ Listening to music
 - c. _____ Walking outside
 - d. _____ Reading
 - e. _____ Providing manicures
 - f. _____ Looking at photos
 - g. _____ Playing cards
 - h. _____ Playing board games like Scrabble, Dominos, Candyland
 - i. _____ Working on a computer
 - j. _____ Telling stories
 - k. _____ Watching movies
 - l. _____ Doing exercises with the Wii
 - m. _____ Holding and petting an animal
 - n. _____ Doing arts and crafts
 - o. _____ Sewing
 - p. _____ Painting
 - q. _____ Knitting/crocheting
 - r. _____ Paying bills

Appendix B

s. _____ Other activities (please list):

6. How has being a visitor in Alexandria's Friendly Visitor Program affected you?

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Thank you for your feedback!

Interview Responses (Qualitative) – Seniors

n= 27

Response rate – 75% (27/36)

How has having a regular visitor from the Friendly Visitor Program affected you?

- The truth is that because if they didn't come, I wouldn't have anyone here. Somedays, I'm going crazy because I am so lonesome. My visitor is a gem.
- Really like it – we have good rapport – I enjoy bringing things up and she responds. She is faithful, comes every week on Tuesday at 12 noon. We talk about things and then she takes me to the hair salon.
- Really wonderful – she is able to get me to talk about almost anything – all sorts of things. Wonderful thing – keep sending visitors.
- I love seeing her and her dog. Having a visitor is good.
- She's become a good friend – always happy to see her. Very helpful because I feel isolated sometimes. She's so delightful - has made a big difference and given me something to look forward to – I miss her when she travels.
- She's such a friendly person – I don't want anyone else.
- She's a very nice person, and we have a very good time. It's a good distraction. We talk about things that I like and she answers questions. It makes a difference because I don't know many people who speak Spanish.
- She is so nice and means a lot to me because I'm alone – my daughter lives in Culpepper. We are both from Pennsylvania and we talk a lot.
- It is wonderful - I enjoy it and look forward to it. It makes you feel better because I'm alone and homebound. We sit down and enjoy talking about everything . She's a jewel – I feel happy when she leaves – she's like family.
- Everybody should have this – it's wonderful, opens up the day. Gives me something to look forward to.
- Nice to not be so isolated – had a set time and I looked forward to seeing him – keep it up!
- I like having company - better than being by myself.
- I enjoy it - nice to see different people occasionally.
- I love it – making new friends, meeting new people. It means a lot to me – only have one other regular visitor. I wish I had more visitors – I like people.
- I like it because she's nice and good company.
- I appreciate the program. I wasn't thrilled in the beginning – thought it would be boring and hard, but I got over that quickly. I like having a friend and everybody needs a friend – I have no family in the area. She is interested in me

Appendix C

and my friends here – and she is a young person with different perspectives. I share her with my friends and they like her too.

- He is interested in what I have to say about life. We get along good. It takes up a little of the boredom around here. I'm not interested in the programs they have here because they don't say anything I don't know. I stay in my room and watch classic movies.
- I appreciate it – it's nice and it reminds me that there are other things going on.
- We talk about anything and everything. It keeps you going.
- It's wonderful having a visitor because it brings back memories. It's a good time reminiscing.
- It's nice because some have no visitors. I have a son but he only visits once a month. It gives me a chance to "just touch the world other than being in here." We need more visitors – I am waiting for a new one.
- I like it – she's so nice – we discuss a lot about life and have fun.
- I need a visitor because I have problems to talk about. She stays about an hour and she asks me what I need.
- It's nice to have someone interesting to talk to – we have traveling in common. The program is a very good idea.
- It was fun playing cards (rummy) together.
- It has been an unexpected joy – it seems unreal because it's so joyful – listening to music together. She is like an angel. The program is like a little miracle.
- It's wonderful – I am really enjoying it and taking full advantage of it. I have no family and my friends are dead. She's terrific – has a great personality and is so helpful.

Survey Responses (Qualitative) – Friendly Visitors

n= 19

Response rate = 83% (19/23)

How has being a visitor in the Friendly Visitor Program affected you?

- Enabled me to forge a genuine and rewarding friendship with my senior. Sadly, she died in November. It felt like losing a close family member. The Friendly Visitor Program allowed me to meet its wonderful personnel and volunteers. I believe that the benefits I gained by joining the program far exceed what I contributed. Thanks.
- I enjoy all my visits with my [name]; the aides, and the nurses thank me for spending time to feed her and it helps them out because they have to feed other patients. She has cerebral palsy. It makes you feel good to give back to other people who cannot do for themselves and share with other patients who look forward to talk to you and tell you their stories of they just happy that someone cares about them to talk and encourage them. So many of them do not have family or friends visit them often. I just thank God [for] the time I spend there.
- It's helped me gain perspective on what seniors go through.
- I love being around older people. Both my seniors have led interesting lives, and I get back much more love than I can give.
- I really like my "person" and enjoy the time we spend together.
- It has provided me with more of a sense of making a difference in someone's life and it has given me the opportunity to connect with someone I otherwise would have never met.
- It has made me more aware of the loneliness seniors can experience.
- Made me happy.
- It has made me think about others! Helped me to be less self absorbed.
- I love it! Brings me a lot of satisfaction knowing that I can make my friend's day a little better.
- Made me feel more connected to my community; provided me an opportunity to learn about the area from someone who has lived here for many years; made think twice about the way I interact about seniors I meet on a daily basis.
- I have become very attached. Also, I have a new appreciation for the difficulties associated with social isolation, and with physical and mental limitations.
- It has affected me in a positive way. I feel like I have made a new friend who is amazing to hang out with.

Appendix D

- My family and I have formed a strong bond with my senior, and it has enriched all of our lives.
- I love my visits with [name] and I feel happy visiting her but I have a lot of concerns about her care at the facility which causes a lot of stress.
- Brought a new friend into my life; allowed me to be useful and helpful to someone who needs a dependable friend.
- It brought two wonderful women in my life - kind of like mother figures since I lost my mother at a young age. It has been such a blessing to know them and become friends with them. Has enriched my life immensely.

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