

The First 50 Years Serving Columbia County: Helping Seniors Keep their Independence and Health

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When Community Action Team (CAT) was created in 1966, one of the original programs was set-up to serve the older residents of Columbia County. Fifty years later, senior programs are still at the heart of their community service work. In most cases, CAT performs its work with older adults as the designated Area Agency on Aging (AAA). Each county in Oregon has an AAA; some are stand-alone organizations and some are housed within another agency as is the case in Columbia County.

22% of Columbia County residents are currently 60 years old or more and the percentage is anticipated to increase to almost 30% by 2020. In order to plan for serving this growing population, CAT recently conducted an extensive survey and hosted town hall meetings in order to gather input from the community at large and then prioritize the services made available to seniors. The data gathered will be incorporated into a four-year plan, but will also be shared with other organizations throughout the county so they may address the community feedback too. Topics covered included community supports and services, health, mental health, and substance abuse services, recreation, transportation, housing, and preventative health education. The plan will be submitted to the state in early October and goes into effect January 1st.

To illustrate the impact CAT services have on older residents, three CAT clients share their experiences and observations.

Shelbia Adams is often surrounded by friends and neighbors at her apartment in Scappoose. With a southern accent that belies the Alabama roots she left behind 61 years ago, she quickly charms her way into a newcomer's heart. Adams has lived alone since 2002 when her husband of 47 years, Roger, passed away. After a hospital stay in 2014, her home-visiting physical therapist put her in touch with CAT. Staff came to her home to meet her and assess her particular needs, and then enrolled her in a program called Oregon Project Independence (OPI).

OPI funds allow clients who are at least 60 years old to hire home care workers for a variety of services that help them maintain independence in their home. Someone may be ineligible to receive services through Medicaid, yet unable to completely take care of all of their own needs, so OPI fills in the gap. Through OPI, Adams received weekly home care visits for the next year and a half. Workers helped by picking up groceries for her since she could no longer drive. They also helped with housekeeping chores, cleaning, laundry and more. Adams' eyesight is deteriorating, so her workers even helped make sure the floors were clear of anything that might cause her to trip and fall. Speaking of the assistance she gets, Adams says she "couldn't live alone without it." Even though she usually sees her neighbors every day, she feels safer knowing her care workers are checking in on a regular basis.

After a couple more health-related incidents, Adams' needs increased to the point that she became eligible for Medicaid home care. CAT staff helped her file the necessary paperwork that gave her the resources to receive additional care. She now has help five days a week.

The increased support came just in time. The apartment at the Victorian Manor she has lived in for 14 years is getting exciting upgrades. To ensure continued availability of affordable housing for seniors and

adults with disabilities, CAT purchased the 17-unit complex in March, along with four more units at nearby Olive Court, with the plans to update all the apartments. Just last week Adams returned home after an 18-day stay in a local motel during the remodeling of her home. Now she has new flooring throughout, windows, doors, sinks, faucets, and even sidewalks that make her comings and goings much safer. Of course packing and unpacking all of her belongings would have been virtually impossible for the 79 year old without assistance from her home care workers.

Just a few miles away in Warren, Sidney McBride has a different kind of relationship with the senior programs at Community Action Team. McBride's 47 year old son Michael Lamont has lived with her and her husband Mike for about eight years. Lamont is disabled due to a brain injury that prevents him from living on his own. At the end of 2013 McBride learned of CAT's senior respite care program and asked for help. Respite care is temporary care provided to caregivers of a child or adult with special needs. In CAT's case, the program supports either a caregiver who is over 60 or someone who is caring for a loved one who is over 60. The program's priority is to serve families of low-income, but is open to all. It is primarily supported by private donations, so funding is limited.

Most of the time McBride is home on her own with her son; he is not afraid to say in his own sly way that he gets tired of her sometimes. And, while she very much enjoys spending time with him, being on high alert 24/7 takes its toll. That's where respite comes in.

McBride admits she has difficulty saying, "no" when asked to help. She has a long history of providing care and having a respite worker care for her son gives her the ability to recharge her own batteries. She can get out of the house to do something fun or something that helps her take better care of herself. She and her husband might go to dinner and a movie, or she might go into Portland and stroll through a mall.

Those get-aways provide much more than a little entertainment and change of scenery. When McBride returns to her son after a break, she says she, "can better handle everything." She wants other caregivers to know it's normal to start feeling desperate. Removing yourself from the situation for a while can help make the same circumstances look totally different and feel more manageable.

CAT provides yet another service to seniors through a preventative health classes. CAT partners with Public Health Foundation to teach classes on diabetes prevention, diabetes self-management, and chronic pain self-management. Rene'e Swartz has participated in two courses in the last few months. Even with a long ride from Clatskanie to St. Helens or Scappoose, Swartz received many benefits from both.

Before the diabetes prevention class, Swartz did not understand how to count carbohydrates or to make substitutions; now she does. In a small group setting she learned more about triggers that contribute to high blood sugar so she can make better choices. Later, in the chronic pain self-management class she learned how to manage her pain better through strength exercises, stretches and even meditation. She says the class was, "a success to me. Now I have the skills to manage the chronic pain so I can enjoy my life." Swartz now paces herself better and looks forward to continuing practicing her new tools.

These are just some of the many resources available to Columbia County residents who are 60 years old or older through Community Action Team. To find out more or to make a donation, please contact the senior programs team at 503-397-3511, option #1.