

Local nonprofit offers calls of comfort for homebound seniors

Calling area homebound residents to help stave off loneliness and provide reassurance has become central to Interfaith Volunteers' efforts.

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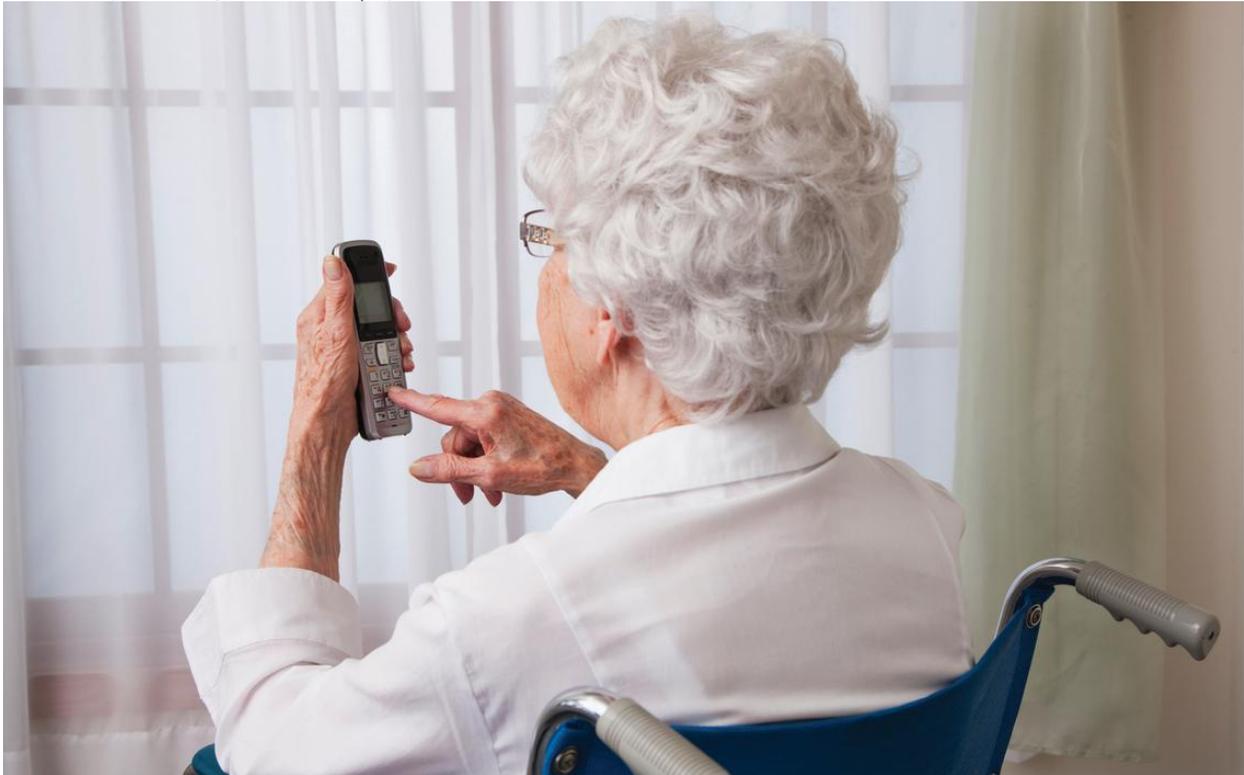


Photo illustration by Metro Newspaper Service

When Gloria Melina's husband died in 2013, she wasn't sure how she would travel to the grocery store, to doctor's appointments or anywhere else.

The Breezy Point woman never learned to drive, and in her eighth decade of life, had no plans to start. That's when Interfaith Volunteers — formerly Lakes Area Interfaith Caregivers — stepped in and became a significant part of Melina's life. It began with providing her rides. In 2016, the organization installed railings on the decks at her home following a knee surgery. And now, while the global coronavirus pandemic has made Melina's outings far less frequent, volunteers are calling her regularly to keep in touch.

“I don’t know what I’d do without these caregivers, really,” Melina, 80, said during a phone interview earlier this month. “Several of them have called me now. It’s nice to know that they still keep checking on us.”

Ann Silgen, executive director of Interfaith Volunteers, said the organization is unable to help in ways it normally does — with rides and home modifications — to keep seniors and people with disabilities living in their homes. Calling area homebound residents to help stave off loneliness and provide reassurance has become central to Interfaith Volunteers’ efforts.

“Maybe they don’t have family around. They’re kept away from their church community right now because of the circumstances,” Silgen said. “I think it’s really important for their mental health — to have someone to talk to and listen on the other end, to provide reassurance that this will pass, and they’re going to be OK.”

Mary Steffenson has been volunteering with Interfaith for nearly 20 years and is now making calls. At 82 herself, the rural Brainerd woman can empathize with the anxiety expressed by homebound seniors, who because of their age are more susceptible to serious complications of the respiratory disease COVID-19 caused by the novel coronavirus. She said the timing of the virus’ appearance may be compounding the feeling of isolation, given many older people spend more time at home in the winter to avoid dangerously icy conditions.

“Not only are they cooped up within their four walls, if they have the radio on, they keep hearing they’re the ones who are most vulnerable for this virus,” Steffenson said. “Many of them are already very dependent on other people for getting their groceries and just outside contact with the world.”

With the suspension of large group activities, including church services and associated activities, Steffenson said the one outlet for social interaction for many seniors is no longer available. She said the disbandment of a senior group at her own church before the pandemic showed her how that kind of loss can affect people.

“Many of the people who were involved in it, many felt lost. It was the one opportunity they had to challenge their mind,” she said. “You can be with people your age who didn’t mind if you talked about your aches and pains.”

Dee Bollinger, 59, has driven clients for Interfaith Volunteers for the past few years. Now making calls to those she usually transports, she finds talking about things other than the virus makes for more pleasant conversation.

“Television, reading statistics — it can look kind of dire,” she said. “To keep our spirits up, we talk about other things. Maybe we talk about a fun memory from the past, things they’d done last Christmas, maybe a year ago Easter. ... Just that little personal visit is kind of important.”

Bollinger said the women she’s talking to live in elder care settings, and while they feel safe they also feel lonely — they’re no longer spending time with other people in the building or gathering for community meals. Offering that human connection can make a difference in a time like this, the Baxter woman said.

“Maybe they just want somebody to pray with them or share a nice memory or talk about the weather,” Bollinger said. “They’re just looking for a little bit of uplifting time. ... Depression could be a huge factor in how people are handling all of this. From my standpoint, I think anything we can do to just encourage and be uplifting, that we’re going to get through this and have confidence and have faith. ... I think it’s wonderful that the community is able to support one another, and I’m grateful to have the opportunity to be able to do it.”

Back in Breezy Point, Melina counts herself lucky — she has a yard to enjoy and tend, a neighborhood of nice neighbors who’ve been checking in on one another and a friend who’s helped her get to the grocery store. But continuing that connection with volunteers, with whom she’s spent a lot of time over the years, is playing a pivotal role in her life.

“I just appreciate their call. I’m doing well, and being seven years now, I’m sort of used to being by myself,” Melina said. “... But the volunteers, they’re not only friendly. They become good friends. ... I just thank God for the wonderful volunteers. They’re always, always there for me.”

To call or be called

Silgen said the organization is hoping to expand their comfort call operation and are seeking contact information for anyone who might need a friendly conversation. She's also welcoming volunteer callers.

"I think there's a lot of people right now who have some extra time on their hands," she said. "This is a pretty easy way to reach out and spend some time helping."

Those interested in either volunteering or receiving phone calls may visit interfaithvolunteers.org or call 218-820-7454.

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