

Michigan Senior Volunteer Programs

HOUSE TESTIMONY

March 16, 2022

Senior Volunteers Save Lives

Representative Whiteford, distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to speak here today.

We are speaking on behalf of the 41 Senior Volunteer Programs of Michigan serving 71 counties.

As we emerge from the pandemic our programs are needed more than ever. We are exceptionally positioned to respond to the new normal, and to break down the new challenges created; such as responding to the critical learning loss experienced by our school aged children, and to respond to the crippling effects of social isolation experienced by our seniors.

The **Retired & Senior Volunteer Program**. Engaged over 4,826 RSVP Volunteers who contribute over 362,000 hours of service annually to organizations, projects, and communities across the state. During the pandemic 333 new RSVP volunteers took action to serve.

Volunteers serve in many ways, they deliver meals, provide non-emergency medical transportation, provide services to at risk seniors, and mentor children to increase school readiness. Over 57,000 individuals were impacted by the services that were provided by RSVP volunteers.

These volunteers do not receive a stipend for their service.

Foster Grandparents are low-income older adults who provide one-on-one assistance to at-risk youth, with the purpose of improving self-esteem and supporting the child's ability to learn and succeed. Foster Grandparents commit an average of 20 hours per week to provide a stable, caring relationship for children who often come from chaotic environments. In exchange for their service, they receive non-taxable stipend of \$3.00 per hour. In 2021,

1,197 Foster Grandparents supported over **4,788** children who were academically delayed, lacking self-esteem or motivation, experiencing behavior or social problems, and at risk of dropping out of school, all of which can cause additional economic stress on our communities.

Senior Companions are low-income older adults who play an important role in supporting frail seniors and adults with disabilities in their quest to live independently for as long as possible.

Senior Companion volunteers add richness to the lives of their clients, while providing access to their community, including grocery shopping, transportation to medical appointments, and opportunities for socialization. Senior Companions also receive a non-taxable stipend for their service.

In 2021, **613** Senior Companions supported **2,452** in home and long-term care clients, mitigating the effects of social isolation, that can exacerbate chronic illness. Senior Companions help seniors live independently in the communities where they choose to reside.

For more than 40 years, the Michigan Legislature has recognized the value and importance of one of our state's strongest resources, our senior volunteers, and we thank you.

We need your help to continue our good work.

In 2020 the US Congress increased the Foster Grandparents and Senior Companions stipend to \$3.00, State allocations have not followed suit for the 49% of state funded volunteers, leaving a \$300,000 shortfall. Last week's signing of the Omnibus Bill increased the stipend to \$3.50 an hour. We are now facing a shortfall of \$650,000. This creates an urgency to fund the new mandate. Without an increase in appropriations, our only remedy is reducing the number of low-income volunteers and the clients they serve by 24%. This would come at a time when our volunteers are needed most.

An increase in appropriations from the current \$4.7 million to \$5.4 million will allow us to maintain current service levels. An increase to \$6.4 million would enable all three programs to expand to better serve the greater challenges created by the pandemic. This increase will serve as a direct benefit to the volunteers and the community.

Please take a moment to read the attached impact stories.

Testimony Provided By:

Jim Dell
Retired & Senior Volunteer Program Coordinator
Ingham, Eaton and Clinton Counties
RSVP of Ingham, Eaton and Clinton Counties
2400 Pattengill Avenue, Lansing, MI 48910
Phone: (517) 887-6116
jim@rsvp-lansing.com

Heidi Powers
Foster Grandparent and Senior Companion Project Director
Alcona, Alpena, Arenac, Cheboygan, Crawford, Iosco,
Montmorency, Ogemaw, Oscoda, Otsego, Presque Isle and
Roscommon Counties
Northeast Michigan Community Service Agency
2375 Gordon Rd., Alpena, MI 49707
Phone: (989) 358-4632
powersh@nemcsa.org

Michigan Senior Volunteer Program Impact Stories

Volunteers Get Good Feelings in their Heart

John retired after a long career as a retail manager and a regional sales director. "You can only wash the car so many times or cut the grass," he said. His neighbor in **Kalamazoo** had done Meals on Wheels, so he decided to check it out. He delivers meals three days a week. Speaking of the seniors who receive meals he delivers, he said, "After a while, they get to be like friends."

He also volunteers doing home repairs. He helped build a ramp for a woman in a wheelchair. Later, the woman's husband said to him, "Because of the ramp, I was able to take my wife out to dinner for the first time in five years. You walk away with a good feeling in your heart," he said. Volunteering has opened his eyes to the plight of those less fortunate. "The little bit that I do, they appreciate it," he said.

Paying it Forward

Many years ago, Wendy was forced to rely on food stamps. "I know what it is to be poor, and I vowed then, that if I was ever in a position to help someone like I was, I am going to help them."

"After I retired, I volunteered with Meals on Wheels and at the **Kalamazoo Loaves & Food Pantry**," she said. Her husband, James, volunteers with the Tuesday Toolmen, helping older adults with home repairs and modifications so that can stay in their homes as long as possible.

"During my volunteering, I encounter people in great need," she said. "One man always asked for food in cans with pop tops because he didn't have a can opener. Another person had to heat hot dogs in a Mr. Coffee because they didn't have a stove. There are people who are homeless because of a flat tire they couldn't afford to fix. No car, no job. How can you not do something to help these people? You hear about hurricanes and disasters all over the world, but we have concerns here as well. This is where I live. I am focused on helping my community."

Rides for Critical Medical Appointments

United Way received a call from a local social worker, who had entered an 85 year-old **Marquette County** resident's home for a wellbeing check. When the social worker interviewed him, he was having a difficult time answering questions. There was concern that he may be in the early stages of dementia.

An RSVP volunteer provided door to door transportation to his appointment and waited for his evaluation to be completed. The doctor walked his patient out to the waiting room and explained to the transporter that he would need to be admitted to the hospital. He was experiencing a severe urinary tract infection, which was causing issues with memory and cognition.

The RSVP volunteer transported the client to the hospital. The transporter provided an update to the social worker and emergency contact. After treatment, he was able to return to his home, with case management support.

Volunteers help fellow Volunteers

Marti has been an RSVP volunteer for 21 years. She and her husband have been very involved over the years and continued volunteering during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Marti learned that she had stage 4 cancer throughout her body. She has opted for quality of life of a few months instead of grueling treatment that could extend her life. Otsego's United Way TACKLE (Together Against Cancer, Kept Local Everyday) fund stepped up to give the family support with a house cleaner. RSVP set up a meal train and delivers food twice a week.

Marti's husband shared, "please tell the volunteers we thank them from the bottom of our hearts."

Volunteering Brings Out the Best

After retiring, John of Muskegon County started volunteering for the Senior Medical Transportation program. He shared, "it completely changed my life. I am now more open and friendly. It was this job that made me realize I can talk to people. And now, I like to talk with people and to hear their stories. I also learn a lot from the clients I meet. I really enjoy driving and I look forward to volunteering two days a week. Because of RSVP, and AgeWell Services, I am a changed person."

John is a military veteran, RSVP volunteer, and he has volunteered over 800 hours since March of 2019.

Lifesaving Nutrition

RSVP and Senior Companion volunteers give their time to a senior outreach program food pantry serving metro Detroit. One client, representative of many, was basically living off Ramen noodles. Her doctor said her poor diet was making her malnourished; she needed to move into a care facility, or she would die. Now she receives free groceries, including fresh food, delivered to her. With healthier options, she has improved her health and can age in place with dignity.