Looking Back at the Last Several Years

During the past three years, Eras Senior Network has increased its services, doubled its staff, and doubled its budget as it expanded its reach to include Milwaukee County residents. The result has been particularly rewarding: 2021 final figures showed that approximately 4,500 older adults across the two-county service area received help from Eras volunteers. That’s a boost of 450% from 2018 when the agency served one county and one which Eras leaders are particularly proud of.

“Our initial reaction as to whether we could add Milwaukee County to our mix was no,” recalls Eras then Board President Jim Holmes. “But as we got into it, we realized that seniors have many of the same needs in each county – companionship, rides to medical appointments, food delivery and yard cleanups. And we knew we would learn from the successes of the Milwaukee County program and be able to combine that with what we were doing well in Waukesha County.”

Milwaukee County’s seniors had been served by several other non-profits over the years but turmoil in 2019 lead to the program’s imminent closure. Eras was approached by several funders to keep the program operational on a temporary basis and after about six months of operation, decided to make the arrangement permanent.

“There’s been some hiccups along the way but overall, it’s been a great learning process,” says Holmes. The leadership team has met the 2019 goal of ensuring that half its Board of Directors are from Waukesha County and half from Milwaukee County – all while maintaining the critical operational balance of representation from the fields of health care, government, legal, and insurance.

“It is our intent to always keep the board at 50-50,” he says. “We are very cognizant of the people on our board. We want people who have connections with different industries and who are racially diverse. We’re still hoping to recruit more African American members, so we have a diverse board that represents all of the communities that we serve.”

As a result of the changes, Eras also now has three offices – one in Waukesha County and two in Milwaukee County – to accommodate residents in each county.

Heather Uzowulu, development director at Eras, says the most difficult part at the beginning was obtaining information from all of Milwaukee County’s clients to ensure they could be immediately served. In addition, program team members navigated a new computer system at the same time. “These team members were always patient and compassionate even when they were in the first days of a new process,” says Uzowulu.

In terms of hard numbers, the change meant Eras grew from supporting 900 older adults in Waukesha County to serving 4,000 clients each year between the two counties. “And Milwaukee County volunteers who had stayed in touch with the former agency’s offices came aboard with our agency and continued to help clients who need support,” she says. “We now have a group of volunteers from each county who will travel to the other county if there’s a need.”

In addition, the longtime Holiday Giving Program went from assisting 350 Waukesha County clients in 2019 to include 600 Milwaukee County clients in 2020. “Community partners in both counties rallied behind this program, donating enough gifts and funds for the packages to be valued at $60 each (the same value as previous years) despite tripling the number of recipients.”

And what does all of this mean for Eras’ future? “Our plan is for the program to continue to flourish,” says past president Holmes. “There will be more seniors than there are now. The biggest challenge we will have is ensuring we have enough volunteers. We need to make sure we have a pipeline in place for attracting new volunteers.”
Help an Older Adult with Spring Yard Work

Are you looking for a bit of outdoor activity as the weather becomes warmer? Volunteers are needed to help older adults with spring yard clean up. If you or you and a friend, or your family, friend group, faith community group or even sports or scouts groups are interested in helping an older adult prepare their yard for warmer weather, please let us know. Spring cleanup starts around April. To volunteer, in Milwaukee County, call Sarah, at (414) 488-6931 and in Waukesha County, call Marisa, at (262) 522-2402.

Tapestry Event

Tapestry Event, Eras Senior Network’s most significant fundraising event each year, will be held April 28th and for the first time in two years due to the pandemic, it will be held in-person.

Featuring a dinner, wine pull, live auction and silent auction (which can also be accessed online), the event will be held at Sonesta Milwaukee West, 10499 W. Innovation Drive, Wauwatosa.

Pam Paulson, Eras board member, says the event is important due to the ever-increasing population of older adults and adults with disabilities Eras serves in Waukesha and Milwaukee Counties. “The number of seniors we assist is growing every year,” Paulson says.

Paulson notes that each person attending the Tapestry Event or placing a bid on a silent/live auction item will help Eras meet the needs of adults in the community. “And these are not adults who have other opportunities for resources,” she says. “They are the adults and seniors who don’t have the means and don’t have the family to meet their needs.”

Eras’ fundraising goal for the event is $75,000. It will begin at 5:30 pm with a Cash Bar followed by dinner. Tickets are $100 each.

Donations are also being accepted for the in-person/online auction. Suggested donations in the $100-$200 range could include popular gadgets such as a Polaroid Camera, Apple Watch, air fryer, smart security camera; gift certificates for local restaurants, spas, car detailing; gift cards for travel such as Airbnb or Southwest Airlines; gifts for kids such as puzzles, collectibles, and games; or workout items such as dumbbells and yoga mats.

Paulson said popular live auction items in the past have included sponsoring a volunteer taking up to four clients to the Fireside Dinner Theater. “Creative items like this are very welcome,” Paulson says.

Donations in the $500 and above range could include use of cabins or vacation homes; vacation experiences such as Chicago or the Wisconsin Dells; tickets or box seats for a sporting event or show; and one-of-a-kind autographed sports memorabilia.

Paulson explains that the Tapestry Event’s name comes from demonstrating how a community can weave together threads of support to form a tapestry of care for neighbors. “In a tapestry, the threads on their own are weak, but woven together, they become strong – just like how we may struggle to meet our needs if we only try on our own, but through the help of the community coming together in service, we’re able to ensure our needs are met,” she says.

For more information about donations, or to inquire about sponsorships, contact Becca at (262) 522-2409 or at Becca.Snow@Eras.org.

To purchase tickets, visit: ERAS.ORG/OUR-EVENTS/SPECIAL-EVENTS/TAPESTRY-EVENT/
Planning for Future Medical Decisions is Important

National Health Care Decisions Day is April 16 to remind people that it is important to have advance directives in place for future medical needs. An advanced directive is a simple process whereby a person puts into writing what they would like done for them medically if they are unable to communicate. And to ensure that happens, a person designates an “agent” to speak for them.

“If someone doesn’t know what you want, then your wishes or choices might not happen,” says George M. Lange, a retired primary care physician who is board certified in internal medicine and geriatrics. “I bet there is more than one person in your life that cares about you. And it’s important that at least one person knows what you want.”

Traditionally, there are two forms of advance directive: a living will and a health care power of attorney. Physicians can often provide forms to patients; they are also available online by visiting Honoring Choices Wisconsin on the Wisconsin Medical Society website.

“When you lack an advance directive, the people that care about you are put into a bind. They have a choice to do one of two things: they will do more, or they will do less. And if they don’t know, they will agonize over whether they made the right choice for you. But if they know they are carrying out your directive, the choice will be less difficult.”

The first step is to determine what you want done medically if you cannot communicate, Lange says. Then you decide who is best to ensure your wishes are carried out. Sometimes, it’s a spouse, and sometimes it is adult children. A person can also select other relatives or friends. Every situation, Lange says, is different. “But the agent needs to know what your wishes are and needs to be asked if they want the job,” he adds. “You want your agent to be well-informed so they are comfortable making decisions on your behalf.”

When complete, the advance directive needs to be signed in the presence of witnesses – those witness must be disinterested parties so they cannot be a relative or your doctor. They can be neighbors or professionals where you do business or friends.

Lange stresses that others also know your wishes and know who you selected as your agent. “It’s so important to be respectful of others you didn’t select because you don’t want them to torpedo the plans you set up.”

And Lange stressed that signing the advance directive once isn’t always enough. If it has been 10 years since you signed your directive, if your agent has died, if you have been divorced or if you have a newly diagnosed condition or disability, the paperwork should be reviewed. “Any one of these scenarios might change the way about a decision you previously made,” he says.

Lange is chairman of Honoring Choices Wisconsin of the Wisconsin Medical Society and regularly speaks about the importance of advance directives to community groups that include faith communities and community clubs and at places such as libraries and senior centers. For more information about free presentations regarding advance care planning and advance directives, contact Honoring Choices Wisconsin at (866) 442-3800 or https://www.wismed.org/wisconsin/wismed/about-us/honoring-choices/wismed/about-us/honoring-choices.aspx

National Health Care Decisions Day reminds people of the importance of pre-planning. “If you don’t have an advance directive, it’s a perfect time to start working on one,” Lange says. “It’s also a day to remind yourself to go over your advance directive and ensure your agent still wants the job.”
More Volunteer Drivers Needed to Help with Increased Demand

Volunteer drivers at Eras make it possible for local seniors and adults with disabilities to get to their medical appointments, as well as provide a way for clients to receive groceries and food pantry stock boxes through contactless delivery.

The pandemic has affected the number of volunteers able to help, but those with the capacity to continue volunteering have gone above and beyond to support our clients. Many volunteers have taken on double - or even triple - their normal amount of rides to ensure clients receive the services they need.

![Driver Needed Image]

If you or someone you know is interested in becoming a volunteer, please contact:

MILWAUKEE COUNTY:
VolunteerMilwaukee@eras.org
(414) 488-6931

WAUKESHA COUNTY:
Marisa.Strothenke@Eras.org
(262) 522-2402

Eras Staff Members Available to Speak in the Community

Eras Senior Network has begun meeting with community partners in person once again to provide a wide variety of information about the program and program offerings.

These presentations include learning how Eras volunteers help older adults remain living independently at home, how a person can become an Eras client and how interested parties can become Eras volunteers.

Specialized topics are also available including the popular S.T.O.P. Senior Frauds and Scams presentation. This one-hour program, which teaches individuals about common scams that target the senior population, is geared towards seniors and caregivers.

Eras staff members can present programs or staff booths before/during/after religious services, or small group religious community meetings, at community events or at meetings of senior clubs, service clubs or organizations. Staff members wear face coverings while indoors.

For more information or if you’d like to schedule a visit to your faith community or small group, in Milwaukee County, contact Vanessa Harris at (414) 488-6780 and in Waukesha County, contact Heather Uzowulu at (262) 522-2404.