Eras Keeps Both Clients and Volunteers Safe During Pandemic

Keeping both clients and volunteers safe while still providing needed services to older adults has been the focus of Eras Senior Network during the COVID-19 crisis. Masks have been required for all parties during transportation and in-person contact and as much social distancing as possible is encouraged.

“The clients and volunteers have all been really understanding in terms of what has been required,” says Sophia Franklin, Eras’ Milwaukee County Faith in Action director. “We haven’t heard of issues where this has been a challenge, and everything has gone really smooth.”

Eras has masks and sanitizing products available for both volunteers and clients and Franklin says volunteers oftentimes sanitize their vehicles before and after transporting clients. “Another way we are protecting clients and volunteers is by asking that clients sit in the back seat of vehicles to be as far away as possible from the volunteers.”

One change has been for grocery shopping requests: Eras volunteers have not been taking clients to the grocery store. Instead, clients have provided volunteers with their grocery lists and the volunteers have been shopping for them during the pandemic, says Franklin. “We wanted to minimize contact between clients and volunteers and by shopping for clients, we were able to do so while at the same time providing the necessary service,” she says.

General in-home chore requests have been placed on hold unless it was an essential task which needed to be done. “We certainly realize that some requests are necessary and then tell the volunteer what is required of them so the volunteer can make the decision,” says Franklin.

Eras staff also has a checklist they go through with a client whenever a client calls in for a service request. The clients are asked if they are feeling well whether they had any symptoms of the COVID-19 virus or whether they had been exposed to anyone with the virus.

“Clients are very aware of this and have been respectful as to whether or not they are feeling well,” Franklin says. “This is another way we can ensure we keep our volunteers safe.”

If a client is not feeling well and if Eras staff feels it is not appropriate to have a volunteer drive a client to a medical appointment, Eras can arrange other transportation for the client. “We do have a small amount of funding available for alternative transportation arrangements if we have a client who is feeling ill and needs to see a doctor or get tested,” says Franklin.

While some volunteers have temporarily stepped away from transporting clients during the pandemic, other volunteers have increased their availability, says Franklin. And some of them have switched gears and volunteered for contactless opportunities instead. “Volunteers can make weekly or bi-weekly calls to our clients to talk with them and make sure they are healthy. It’s another great way for volunteers to be safe, to keep their families safe and to keep the clients safe as well.”
When Mike Kennedy retired four years ago, little did he know he would be introduced to so many new people daily. That includes meeting a 96-year-old World War II veteran stationed in Austria whose life was spared when a German bomb crashed through the roof, landed inside the building he was in but then failed to explode.

It is all in a day’s work for Mike, an Eras Senior Network volunteer who at 66 has continued driving older adults to medical appointments throughout the pandemic. He normally takes three transportation requests each week, but sometimes takes as many as five. “It’s very enjoyable,” says Mike, a Franklin resident. “I get to meet all kinds of people. These older adults have led full lives and often are very talkative and have interesting things to tell you about their lives.”

A former postal carrier, Mike had heard about helping drive older adults to medical appointments from an announcement at his church, Hales Corners Lutheran Church. Two months after retiring, Mike began to volunteer drive as well as tutor third graders at a Milwaukee Public School. Since the pandemic began, however, he has not been tutoring and instead has been driving older adults more frequently.

“I feel fairly safe about it,” says Mike. “Everyone wears their masks, most of them are not out and about in the community, and they sit in the back seat. I think it’s very safe.”

Mike says his faith prompted him to be an active volunteer driver for Eras. “My wife and I both feel an obligation to give something back. This is something I wanted to do, and as it turns out, I really enjoy it.” Mike sees first-hand the need to help seniors. “When people can’t drive anymore, boy it’s hard to get around,” he explains. “Even if they have children in the area, it’s hard for their children to take off time from work.”

Mike calls his volunteer work “rewarding” and notes more individuals are needed to transport older adults. “Older adults need to get to appointments that are important, and they might not otherwise have a way to do it without volunteers.”

Over the years, Mike says he has heard the adage that a volunteer gets as much out of volunteering as the person he or she is helping. “It’s really true,” he says. “When you volunteer you get a lot out of it yourself. Not only are you providing a nice service to someone who really needs it, but it also helps you feel good about it as well.”

**Vaccine Transportation**

Eras Senior Network and Froedtert & Medical College of Wisconsin in Menomonee Falls have partnered to provide older adults with transportation to receive their COVID-19 vaccinations.

“We know there are older adults without a local support system and often times lack transportation,” says Sarah Harvey, Eras’ Mobility Manager. “The elderly population is one of the most fragile and it is especially important that they receive their vaccinations.”

Discussions began earlier in the pandemic when Eras and Froedtert knew some patients would have difficulty getting to their vaccination appointments, says Harvey. “We all saw the need and created a process that would work for everyone involved.”

Eras has dedicated one of their agency vehicles to provide transportation to referred patients who may need rides to their COVID-19 vaccination appointments. Ambulatory adults, who reside in Waukesha County and are over the age of 65 are provided Eras’ telephone number and are accommodated if the vehicle is available. Non-ambulatory adults are referred to private pay transportation providers that offer wheelchair accessible rides.

“Our van is available Monday–Friday, between 9:00am and 12:00pm,” says Harvey. “We ask for a 5-day advance notice but realize that is not always possible and will strive to accommodate the best we can”.

Patients who reside in Milwaukee County and fall under the same criteria as noted above are directed to the Milwaukee County Department on Aging (MCDA). MCDA provides ambulatory and non-ambulatory rides for $3.00 one-way. Patients are also given information for additional private pay transportation providers in Milwaukee County that offer wheelchair accessible rides.

“This is a much-needed collaboration, Harvey says. Ensuring that older adults have transportation to receive their vaccinations – regardless of whether they are Eras clients – is very important,” Harvey says.
Older Adults Help Create Artwork Out of Relationships During COVID-19

A cookbook packed with recipes to fill stomachs and nurture lives, a recording of thoughts and song, and images of safe and joyful places are among the artistic creations inspired by telephone calls between 80 older adults and 10 artists last fall.

The conversations began with “Beautiful Questions” that had no right or wrong answers. Instead, they were designed to help with the loneliness and isolation many older adults face in a typical year but even more so during the pandemic. The project brought a greater sense of connectedness to the area artists who participated as well.

Most of the older adults who participated in Tele-Stories were clients of Eras Senior Network. “In a moment where everyone seemed to be going tech, we decided to go old school and work with what is accessible to most people – the telephone,” says Sammy Goodrich, TimeSlips program manager. “There was something really special about using the phone and having a relationship blossom without either person ever seeing each other.”

Michael Snowden, a visual artist, asked his group members a simple question: “If you could create a safe place or go anywhere in the world, what would that look like?” After 10 to 12 weeks of individual weekly conversations with each of his older adults, Snowden created 8x10 full color posters for each. One older adult’s picture came from her describing her favorite place: her backyard with animals and trees. Another older adult’s artwork was filled with him describing joyful moments: attending concerts and seeing his favorite performers. “It was really cool to connect with people who have so much wisdom and so much experience,” Snowden explains. “My favorite part of the program was talking with people I probably never would have had a conversation with. And I can honestly say that I have gained some friends.”

Another artist created a “Recipes for Daily Living” cookbook filled with contributions from older adults for their favorite foods and their recipes for life. In her recipe for “Family Care,” for example, Mrs. M. said, “Stay close together, in good times and bad. Always stick together and help one another.” In her recipe for “Awakening,” Melody M. explained how to come to the realization that one is “blessed.” And Al included his “Brandy Old Fashioned” recipe: “That’s my own recipe. You can’t get it in a tavern, or any place. There isn’t a place that makes it that way.”

Goodrich says the conversations created relationships that went beyond reducing isolation. “Being able to connect with someone in a respectful manner, to see a person for who they really are is so important,” she says.

The participants were surveyed after the program was completed: 51% of the older adults reported feeling less lonely and isolated, while a surprising 60% of the artists reported the same. “Our idea was to reduce isolation with the elders,” Goodrich says. “I didn’t expect it to do the same with the artists.”

While organizations like Eras Senior Network routinely telephone interested older adults to check on their wellness, Goodrich says Tele-Stories took it a step further. “These calls go beyond wellness checks to provide the opportunity to engage creatively with someone and build meaningful connections that reduce social isolation.”

Auction Items Needed for Tapestry Fundraising Event

The Tapestry Event is Eras Senior Network’s biggest fundraiser each year. All funds raised at the event go towards supporting the important programs of Eras. The 2021 event will be a virtual event held mid-day and in the evening on Thurs., Sept. 30. Please consider donating items for this event.

Silent Auction Item Ideas (Valued $100 - $200):
- Basket of local favorites (cheese, beer, wine, spices)
- Popular new gadgets (air fryer, Vitamix, KitchenAid mixer, Instapot, Fitbit)
- Gift certificates (restaurant, massage, salon, portrait session)
- Handmade quilts
- Theatre tickets
- Art pieces

Live Auction Item Ideas (Valued $500+):
- Use of cabin or other vacation property
- Tickets or box seats to a sporting event or show (i.e. 4 Marquette tickets)
- Culinary Experience (Chef-made meal for 8, exclusive tour of restaurant with dinner)
- Unique Experience (Hunting or fishing with a pro, backstage tour, celebrity meet and greet)

Thank you for your consideration. Every donation helps get us closer to our fundraising goal and continues to support our programs. If you have questions or would like to donate, please contact Development Manager Becca Snow at (262) 522-2409 or at becca.snow@eras.org.
Volunteers Needed for Spring Yard Cleanup

Individuals, families, and groups of people are needed to help with this year’s Spring Yard Cleanup for Eras Senior Network clients especially after this year’s brutal winter of heavy snow, bitter cold, ice and wind.

“All the volunteers have to do is go to the client’s home and clean up the yard,” says Sophia Franklin, one of the agency’s two Faith in Action directors. “The work is completely contact less and the client does not even go outside,” she says. “We hope this opportunity will entice volunteers to help out if they have not felt comfortable volunteering in another way.”

Typical yard cleanups involve yard raking, bush trimming, clearing of debris, bagging it all and then taking it away for disposal if there is no community yard waste pickup.

Volunteers in Milwaukee and Waukesha Counties can do the work anytime they want once the snow has melted. Oftentimes, Milwaukee County volunteers coincide their cleanup with Make a Difference Day (April 17) when area college students band together to clean up yards of older adults. Although the colleges believe they will have student volunteers this year, it is an unknown, since many are attending school remotely during the pandemic, Franklin says.

“We’re really looking for volunteers – both individuals and groups – to supplement the work that the students do,” says Franklin. “They can help out on Make a Difference Day or another time even as late as early June. We are looking for more groups of people, whether that is through congregations, or businesses, or families with children, or friend groups. We are looking for as many volunteers as possible.”

Volunteers are provided with a client’s name, address and telephone number and told what type of items the client has such as rakes, bags or clippers as well as what items the volunteers need to bring.

Franklin acknowledges that much of the work is weather dependent. “We’re crossing our fingers that the snow will be melted and there won’t be any more winter events.” She also says that the last two cleanups – the spring 2020 and the fall 2020 – both took place during the pandemic and everything went smoothly. “We encourage clients to stay indoors and volunteers do not make contact except to wave from a distance.”

To volunteer in Milwaukee County, contact Suzanne Endres:
Suzanne.Endres@Eras.org • (414) 488-6500, ext. 6504

To volunteer in Waukesha County, contact Marisa Strothenke:
Marisa.Strothenke@Eras.org • (262) 522-2402