Spring is my favorite time of the year. Windows get opened, we see more sunlight and we hear children begin to play outside again, with just jackets on instead of big, heavy coats. After the long winter, both here in Wisconsin and in my native Denmark, we all welcome the beginning of spring.

I still remember when I was young, watching cows “dance” in the grassy fields after being let outside from the barns in early spring. Even the cows were delighted at being outside again in fresh air after the dark winter!

Spring is truly a time for new beginnings – all of a sudden, everything goes from grey and dark to all variations of green and morning light as well as evening light.

As we all begin to look forward to receiving the COVID-19 vaccine and slowly open our lives back up again, let us rejoice in this new season. Open the windows on one of the first warm spring days this month to let in fresh air. Take a walk outside if it is safe to do so. Celebrate springtime by picking up a small bouquet of flowers from the grocery store to brighten up your kitchen table or counter. Rejoice in the light of spring!

Creating Artwork Out of Relationships with Older Adults

A cookbook containing recipes to fill a stomach and nurture a life, a recording of thoughts and song and images of safe and joyful places are among pieces of art inspired by telephone calls between 80 older adults and 10 artists from Milwaukee County this past fall.

The conversations, which focused on “Beautiful Questions” that had no right or wrong answers, were geared to help with the loneliness and isolation often faced by older adults and heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Most of the older adults who participated in the program, called Tele-Stories, were recruited from Eras Senior Network’s clients. “In a moment where everyone seemed to be going tech, we decided to go old school and work with what is most accessible to most people – the telephone,” says Sammy Goodrich, TimeSlips program manager. “There was something really special about using the telephone 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 10-12 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.

“They bestowed a lot of knowledge upon me,” Snowden explains. “It was really cool to connect with people who have so much wisdom and so much experience. My favorite part of the program was connecting with seniors and 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 food-based recipes as well as recipes for life such as: “Family Care,” “An Awakening,” and “Enjoying Life.” In her recipe for “Family Care,” Mrs. M. said, “Stay close together, in good times and bad. Always stick together and help one another.” Melody M. said in her recipe for “Awakening” included realizing how to feel 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. “These artists were able to connect on a different level and the fact that they were able to form such relationships in just 10 weeks was very impactful.”
COVID-19 and Emotional Health

It is normal to feel uncertain and a bit “down in the dumps” during the COVID-19 pandemic, but experts say there are some warning signs that seniors should be aware of that might necessitate a call to your family physician.

“COVID-19 is an international crisis which is causing heightened stress and anxiety for everyone, especially those directly affected by the illness, a job loss, reduction in income, or the inability to do what they would normally do,” says Brad Smith, MD, medical director, at the Rogers Behavioral Health Oconomowoc campus. “There’s an increased sense of hopelessness and depression.”

Smith says while those feelings can be a normal response to stressors, when they continue for a long period of time it could signal the need for treatment.

**Warning signs include:**

- Trouble sleeping or excessive sleeping that is not restorative, significant changes in energy level, changes in ability to concentrate, and significant and prolonged appetite changes.

“These are physical signs that depression has really set in and affected the brain chemistry, and they indicate intervention is needed,” says Smith.

In addition, the amount of time being spent indoors alone – with reduced social contact – may contribute to anxiety and depression issues, says Rachel Leonard, PhD, clinical director for Rogers’ Twin Cities clinics.

Leonard suggests finding creative ways to stay connected. While not a one-to-one replacement for time spent together in person, using technology for a family activity, decorating cookies together or joining a video call to watch a sporting event are options.

Leonard notes that it is easy to fall into the pitfall of watching endless hours of television. Leonard advises to try and avoid this from happening by finding a new hobby. Virtual book clubs or game nights create something to regularly look forward to and provide a social outlet.

“It can be helpful to learn something new with another person—both for social reasons and for increased accountability,” Leonard says. “Do you have a friend or family member who wants to learn something new with you? You could meet on video chat regularly to check in together and discuss how things are going.”

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**Milwaukee and Waukesha Counties Now Each Have FIA Program Directors**

The Faith in Action program has grown so much in the past two years that Eras Senior Network now has two Program Directors – one for Milwaukee County and one for Waukesha County.

Judith Amorsen, who previously oversaw both counties, will now direct the Waukesha County FIA program; Sophia Franklin will now direct the Milwaukee County FIA program.

Franklin’s name might ring a bell for some Milwaukee County clients. Previously, Franklin worked in the Unison South Shore Regional Neighborhood Office in South Milwaukee and most recently, she was one of two Program Managers for Eras’ Milwaukee County FIA program.

“Our goal is to expand our program into every community in Milwaukee County and increase access to all our programming,” says Franklin. “Creating a Program Director position for Milwaukee County acknowledges the growth the Milwaukee County is seeing. We want to ensure we have adequate staffing in place to support that growth.”

Franklin said the Milwaukee County team will be focusing on increasing volunteer support and establishing community relationships throughout the County. “We will be building and fostering these relationships. We want to expand our reach to diversify our partnerships and make sure we are accountable to older adults in all areas of Milwaukee County.”

In addition to handling administrative duties for the Milwaukee County FIA team, Franklin will also be reporting on and developing/implementing strategies to meet the needs of clients, overseeing effective services for all Milwaukee County clients, attending community group meetings and supervising the Milwaukee County FIA team.

This marks the second major push into Milwaukee County for Eras in recent months. The agency recently opened a new office in the Harambee/Lindsay Heights Neighborhood to ensure older adults who live in that area have greater access to transportation to medical appointments, have options to receive groceries and have opportunities to volunteer.

“As we mark the two-year point of our 2019 expansion of services into Milwaukee County, we’re grateful to the community for welcoming our agency and helping us to make connections that allow us to serve older adults,” says Kathy Gale, Executive Director of Eras Senior Network. “We’re especially thankful for the congregations and volunteers who continue to support Milwaukee County older adults with their financial support and committed service. We look forward to the Faith in Action programs in both counties continuing to grow and serve our community’s growing populations of older adults.”
The Importance of COVID-19 and Influenza Vaccines

Vinay Sharma, MD
Resident
Family Medicine, Froedtert & the Medical College of Wisconsin - Town Hall Health Center

At a time like this, I understand your concerns and possibly fears regarding the new COVID-19 vaccine.

As a primary care provider, I am comfortable recommending that people of all ages receive the vaccine when available to them. Furthermore, the senior community is particularly important to vaccinate first due to their increased risk for severe complications due to COVID-19 such as hospitalization, serious illness, and death.

The COVID-19 vaccine does not give you COVID-19. It is important to understand this as it is a common misconception. The vaccine teaches your natural immune system how to recognize the real COVID-19 virus and how to fight it off. This process of teaching your immune system can sometimes give you a fever, joint pains, muscle aches and some other symptoms but do not mistake these symptoms for the actual disease. Vaccines are a cornerstone of preventive medicine and aim to protect us from developing the actual disease.

Ultimately, the choice is yours regarding the vaccine, and this choice will incorporate your personal beliefs. The tricky aspect of COVID-19 is that we do not know who will get sick and we do not know the severity of the sickness. Some people may get the virus and experience no symptoms while others will be hospitalized; I have seen the entire spectrum. In the medical community, we do know that as we age, our body's natural immune system weakens, and it becomes harder to fight disease. Furthermore, if you have other diseases such as diabetes, COPD, or heart failure, this can also worsen outcomes of COVID-19.

I often discuss treatments with my patients in terms of risks and benefits. COVID-19 poses many potential risks to health which could be avoided with a vaccine. The same is true of the flu. And in a time like this, a pandemic, it is also vital to obtain the flu vaccine. Both COVID-19 and the flu cause damage to our lungs making it difficult to breathe. Vaccines protect us against these viruses and potential complications such as pneumonia.

Available information surrounding these vaccines is both deluding and illuminating the truth. I strongly recommend you speak to your primary care provider or seek credible resources (such as the Center for Disease Control and Prevention) for additional information.

On a personal note, we need older adults to enrich our communities and families. You have a wealth of love, experience and stories that needs to be heard in the garden, around the kitchen table, or sitting in your lap. It would be a tragedy to lose you to a disease that could have been prevented.

Please receive the vaccine when it becomes available.

Important Phone Numbers

MILWAUKEE COUNTY:
Transportation, Grocery and Yard Work Service Requests: (414) 488-6500
Telephone reassurance for Homebound Older Adults Living in Milwaukee County: Vital Voices: (414) 771-4368
Milwaukee County Transit Plus: (414) 343-1700
Milwaukee County Department on Aging Transportation (First Transit, Inc.):
• For new riders (to enroll): Aging Resource Center (414) 289-6874
• To schedule a ride (once enrolled): First Transit, Inc. (414) 847-2744
Aging and Disability Resource Center of Milwaukee County: (414) 289-6874
Milwaukee County Energy Assistance: (414) 270-4653
Hunger Task Force: (414) 777-0483

WAUKESHA COUNTY:
Aging and Disability Resource Center of Waukesha County: (262) 548-7848
Transportation, Grocery and Yard Work Service Requests: (262) 549-3348

BOTH COUNTRIES:
IMPACT 211: 2-1-1
Wisconsin Elder Abuse Hotline: 1 (833) 586-0107
National Elder Fraud Hotline: 833-FRAUD-11 or (833) 372-8311
What Does Eras Do with Client Information?

A question about our recent flu vaccine mailing prompted the question: “What does Eras do with client information? Could our information be sold, prompting mailings from solicitors?”

Eras Senior Network keeps your information private and will not give or sell your information to outside sources. The recent flu vaccine mailings were sent by Eras, in partnership with community organizations and dedicated grant funds paying for printing and mailing.

Clients receiving direct services may receive occasional greeting cards to brighten spirits during the pandemic. Clients will also receive a printed newsletter in the mail four times a year.

If you would prefer not to receive mail, please let us know and we will be happy to remove you from our mailings. If you have questions, contact Judith Amorsen, Program Director, Waukesha County at (262) 522-2411 or Sophia Franklin, Program Director, Milwaukee County at (414) 488-6929.

Information to Have Handy When Requesting Services

If you are an active client with Eras, please remember to have the following information handy when you call in your requests: • The name and address of the medical professional where you have an appointment. • The appointment time. • The anticipated length of the appointment.

This greatly helps our staff when it comes to recording your request in an efficient manner. Thank You! Milwaukee County residents, call (414) 488-6500, Waukesha County residents, call (262) 549-3348.

Milwaukee County First Transit

First Transit, Inc. is the new transportation provider for the Milwaukee County Division on Aging. This service allows those 60 and older to receive free rides to the grocery store and voting sites. Those eligible can get a ride to medical or dental appointments with a $3 co-pay each way.

“During 2021, your rides will be safe, friendly, and accessible,” said Jon Janowski, interim executive director for the MCDA. “Cleaning and screening protocols will be in place to keep you safe from COVID-19 and only single rides will be scheduled for the duration of the Public Health Emergency.”

Rides to senior dining sites, the county-owned senior centers and MCDA Wellness Programs will resume when it is safe to do so, he added.

To be eligible, riders need to live in Milwaukee County, be 60 years or older, show a photo ID when they board the vehicle, not have easy access to other means of transportation and not be enrolled in Family Care, IRIS, Partnership or Medicaid.

The Anticipated Length of the Appointment.

The cost is $5.25 per ride. Additional fares may apply for older adults who are blind or have limited mobility. Be sure to have the following information when booking your ride:

• The name of the medical professional where you have an appointment.
• The appointment time.
• The anticipated length of the appointment.

To be eligible to utilize RideLine for that trip. It is very important for an individual to complete the full application, he added.

To be eligible, riders need to live in Milwaukee County, be 60 years or older, show a photo ID when they board the vehicle, not have easy access to other means of transportation and not be enrolled in Family Care, IRIS, Partnership or Medicaid.

The Aging and Disability Resource of Waukesha County (ADRC) offers subsidized transportation services for non/limited-driving older adults 60 years and older, and for individuals with disabilities under the age of 60.

Eligible riders must reside in Waukesha County and cannot be enrolled in Family Care, IRIS, PACE, Partnership or Medicaid.

The Shared-Fare Taxi Program is for ambulatory, non/limited-driving older adults and those with disabilities who can get in and out of a vehicle with little or no assistance. “Fares vary by taxi provider and the distance of a ride. To assist riders with the cost, the ADRC pays $5.25 of each eligible one-way ride,” says Sarah Harvey, Mobility Manager of Eras Senior Network.

The RideLine Program is for non/limited-driving older adults and those with disabilities who need assistance entering and exiting a vehicle. The RideLine Program utilizes lift-equipped vehicles to support riders who use assistive devices such as walkers and wheelchairs or who may have a visual impairment. Fares are determined once an application is completed and processed by the ADRC.

“Fares vary by taxi provider and the distance of a ride. To assist riders with the cost, the ADRC pays $5.25 of each eligible one-way ride,” says Sarah Harvey.

To apply, call the ADRC at (262) 548-7848. Certified individuals will receive an ID card in the mail within 7 business days. Information about the programs and instructions how to request a ride will also be provided.