When the world shut down back in March, we hoped that we would be able to continue connecting elders with volunteers in meaningful ways given that many of our programs would have to suspend face-to-face contact for an unknown period of time. Our elders have confirmed that connection has been successful, and seven months later, we know that you, our volunteers, are continuing to have a huge impact on the lives of elders throughout the Greater Boston area. We see this impact in the number and longevity of matches made, and in the stories we hear from you and from elders. Together, we have reached 1500 elders this past year, providing assistance with errands or tasks, companionship and friendship, and/or support in making a medical appointment.

Creating connections and building relationships has always been the heart of what FriendshipWorks does. While COVID-19 has undoubtedly increased elders’ isolation, most of us have also experienced some of the negative impacts of isolation regardless of our age. We are heartened by your stories about what these relationships mean to you. One volunteer just celebrated five years of visiting with her elder while another shared that the weekly visit has added needed structure to his days during the lockdown. Overall, volunteers share how much they look forward to the visits, and for volunteers who live alone, how the visits helped relieve some of their own loneliness and isolation.

In this quarterly E-news issue, we’re excited to highlight the impact you are making and why it is so important. We also want to update you on the status of our programs and new initiatives, and include resources for you and/or your elder. We welcome your feedback and would love to hear what you would like to see in future quarterly volunteer newsletters!

The Impact of FriendshipWorks’ Volunteers

Loneliness and Social Isolation: The Depth of the Problem

According to a 2019 University of Michigan study on healthy aging, 34% of adults aged 50-80 years of age nationally reported feeling lonely. For those who lived alone, 60% reported feeling a lack of companionship and 41% felt isolated. Many of those who feel lonely are also socially isolated: defined as a lack of social interactions, contacts, and relationships with family, friends or society at large. Social isolation can result from poor physical or mental health, unemployment, loss of mobility, or major life events such as the loss of a partner or friends. Even the physical design of communities and lack of transportation can contribute to isolation. For the isolated older adult, this may mean staying home for lengthy periods of time with little communication with friends, family, or others in the community.

The pandemic has made the problem of social isolation for older adults even worse, as their ability to connect at senior centers or residential community rooms, attend places of worship, engage in recreational or educational opportunities, utilize volunteer or social services, or visit with family and friends have all been severely limited. While video conferencing through Zoom, Facetime, Skype, or What’s App have helped many of us deal with our own isolation during this period, most of our elders live on limited budgets and therefore lack internet access and smart devices needed for connecting in this essential way.
Social isolation is unfortunate but does it matter?

For over a decade, it’s been well established that social isolation has detrimental effects on the mental health, emotional well-being and physical health of older adults. Older adults who are socially isolated are at increased risk for dementia, depression, sleeping disorders, stress and anxiety, and memory and cognitive decline. Research has also shown that the health risks of social isolation are comparable to the dangers of smoking and obesity, increasing mortality risk by up to 30%. High blood pressure, a lowered immune system, and accelerated cardiovascular aging are just a few of the physical changes triggered by social isolation. Social isolation has been described as being equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

Our Solution and the Volunteer Impact

At FriendshipWorks, volunteers are central to our strategy for addressing elder isolation and improving quality of life. During the past year, we had more than 650 volunteers engage in our Friendly Visiting, Friendly Helping Medical Escort, and PetPals programs. We had volunteers ranging from 18 to 88 that collectively, allowed us to support 1500 elders.

Equally powerful are the stories elders telling us about how much they value your visits, helps, and escorts. They talk about how important it is to them to have a caring connection and look forward to your call or visit. You have provided warmth and friendship, helped elders navigate through hospitals, translated for those who would otherwise have difficulty communicating, helped move into and retain housing, gone grocery shopping and run essential errands (especially during the first few months of the pandemic), and been the first eyes that have helped identify when an elder needs additional support or services. Below is an example of just one of the many stories that illustrate the impact you have.

Oftentimes when making matches, we hear how mutually beneficial a match is for both the elder and the volunteer. Recently, the story of Gerthy & her volunteer John was one such story we heard and wanted to share with you.

Gerthy and John's Story

“Thank you for giving me special attention. Sometimes that’s all I need to realize that I am not alone; my pain remains but so does the love. My dream is to build a school in Haiti. That idea seemed like nothing but a crazy thought until John listened and believed me,” said Gerthy.

“Gerthy gave a lecture in my office on her community organizing in Boston & Haiti, said John, her volunteer match.”I just wanted to let you know how satisfying and productive this relationship has been."

“Elders deserve cheer, joy, and hope. That’s what this (Friendly Visiting) program is to me. Thank you from the bottom of my heart," she added.

The gift is in the giving, as John notes, but for Gerthy, receiving the friendship is the best gift. You make this possible. Thank you.