



SENIORS & AGING

## More than food and chores, these programs connect Whatcom senior citizens

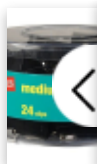
BY MICHELLE NOLAN  
*For The Bellingham Herald*

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For Whatcom County seniors determined to escape the trap of loneliness – whether they are home-bound, lower-income and/or still getting around – there are intriguing options.

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Meals on Wheels (as it is commonly called) is directed by Julie Meyers; Bellingham At Home is a relatively new senior program guided by program director Colleen Harper.

Meyers, Harper and Molly Simon, director of the large and ever-humming Bellingham Senior Activity Center, talked about how making new friends is a huge advantage of their programs.

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## Meals On Wheels

So what does “And More” mean? Primarily, the nutritious hot lunches offered every weekday at the Bellingham Senior Activities Center for those 50 and older and during regularly designated weekdays at eight other locales in Whatcom County and three in San Juan County.

No one is turned away for inability to pay, but suggested donations are \$5 for those 60 and older and \$7 for those 50 and older.

The friendships formed, of course, are priceless.

There are also nutrition education classes.

“Meals on Wheels” is funded by government grants and local donations.

The numbers are higher than many might suspect: more than 86,000 frozen meals plus breakfast and milk were delivered to several hundred home-bound seniors 60 and older, mostly by volunteers, in 2017. The community programs for hot lunches at the 12 sites served about 99,000 meals.

No one knows how many friendships have developed, but the number is doubtless in the thousands.

“When a substitute is filling in for one of our volunteers, we sometimes get calls from our (home-bound) seniors asking where Sam is,” Meyers says. “People really look forward to the visits.”



Meyers says there is no strict limit as to how long volunteers can stay and chat, but since they all have routes to cover, time can be somewhat limited. But nothing prevents friendships from developing, especially since the volunteer may be one of the few people the home-bound senior sees each week.

No home-bound senior is turned away for inability to pay.

“The program is not income-based,” Meyers says. “It’s based on donations. I don’t want anyone to feel like we’re watching them.”

Seven days’ worth of meals are delivered during each volunteer’s visit after a senior has been accepted into the program, following an assessment of each applicant’s circumstances.

Seniors recovering from a health problem who are temporarily home-bound can qualify until they can get around again.

The overall local need for Meals on Wheels has been climbing year-after-year.

“Since 2014, we’ve seen a 40-percent increase,” says Meyers, who has a full-time staff of a dozen and several more part-time employees. In 2018 alone, numbers are up by more than 10 percent.

“We are always looking for volunteers,” she says, pointing out how much more they are needed with the dramatic increase in seniors served. Volunteers can receive mileage reimbursements.

Volunteers need to pass background checks, both legal and with the Department of Motor Vehicles.

## Bellingham At Home

This program ([bellinghamathome.org](http://bellinghamathome.org)) also tends to create friendships with an “age in place” emphasis, providing much-needed help for whatever a senior might not be able to do for himself or herself.

“We’re part of a national Village to Village network, a great national organization that began in Boston,” Harper says. “Bellingham At Home (for Bellingham residents) began in 2016.”

The program consists entirely of volunteers.

“Our members call us and we try to fill needs not filled by other services,” Harper says. “We don’t do in-home medical work (such as a trained caregiver would provide). We try to avoid duplication of services.”

For example, tasks such a caring for lawns may be performed, but not on a regular basis. For that, a bus



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Bellingham At Home costs \$450 per year to become a member of the “Village.” The cost can be paid in monthly installments if needed. It’s a form of social and occupational insurance.

Harper points out that many tasks at home can seem simple, but seniors may not be able to do them with confidence or safety.

“Take ladders,” she says. “Seniors may need to have something installed (such as a fire alarm or a much-needed light bulb in a walk-in closet). They can call our volunteers for that sort of help.”

Such tasks may indeed seem pretty basic if you’re young, but try finding a business that installs light bulbs for free.

“We have ‘handy people’ who include a lot of women,” Harper says. “We can fill transportation requests, such as a trip to a doctor. But if we can’t fill a need, we will refer seniors to someone who can.”

Indeed, Bellingham At Home fills many needs that family members or neighbors once more commonly provided in an era that wasn’t so busy.

So many younger people are just trying to keep up financially in today’s world, many seniors can develop feelings of isolation if they can’t find anyone who can help them when needed, especially when a senior becomes home-bound for a short spell following treatment for a health issue.

One of Bellingham At Home’s new services involves the use of trained medical note-takers, Harper notes.

“We have a task force for health and advocacy,” she says. “For example, we will send a trained, confidential note-taker to give seniors help at a doctor’s appointment.”

Kate Birr, an enthusiastic Bellingham At Home member, leads a four-person publicity task force.

“We do the newsletter and the brochure. The four of us keep up the content on our web site,” Birr says.

Birr uses the services, too.

“I called for someone to consult on buying a new computer and got the help I needed,” says Birr, who also asked another volunteer to install lighting outside her home.

“We’re really trying to emphasize community building,” she says. “We’re doing that with neighborhood clusters (people from neighborhood).”

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Harper calls social relationships “really the most important part of our program.”

“Most of our volunteers are also seniors. Connecting people in a really meaningful way is so important.”

Harper herself exudes a positive attitude toward people.

“I think people are wonderful,” she says. “I really value (that seniors) get better as we age. I get to work with truly motivated people who want to live lives of community service.”

In other words, it’s a way to age-in-place with friendly people who can help provide a better quality of life.

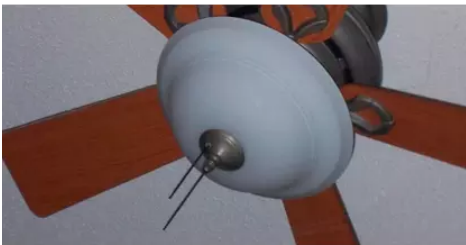
“This is a key place (in the lives of seniors) where people can feel comfortable,” Simon says of the senior center, which has more than 1,700 members. “It really helps people get out of the house and make new friends.”

When Simon sees friendships develop, it’s always a thrill.

“We can play such a big role in lives,” she says. “Many of our seniors say this is their home away from home ... The benefits of community living are often overlooked.”

The senior center offers dozens of programs for a wide variety of interesting, helping seniors find friends who realize they have a lot in common.

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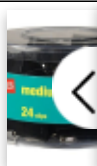
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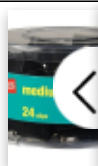
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