

HERALD-WHIG

Area Agency on Aging offers solutions to combat senior isolation during holidays



Photo: Michael Kipley

November 30, 2016

By Matt Dutton

QUINCY -- Volunteer work at the Quincy Senior and Family Resource Center has renewed Jeannette Shrader's purpose in life.

Almost immediately after retiring, Shrader, a widow, set to helping others at the senior center. With her children living out-of-state, Shrader knew social isolation could quickly become a crutch and negatively impact her overall outlook.

"This senior center became my family. I like being around people, and I like being useful," Shrader said. "If I had been home alone for so many years, I wouldn't be in good shape."

Shrader began delivering food to local seniors and shut-ins through the Meals on Wheels program.

"It means a lot to just see another person sometimes," Shrader said of the people who receive the meals. "I've developed some strong relationships over the years through it. One woman calls me 'mom' and hugs me whenever she sees me."

Meals on Wheels, and the senior center as a whole, "has been a huge blessing in my life," Shrader said. "I knew sitting at home wasn't going to be good for me, so I immediately took action. As long as I'm moving around, I'm fine."

Social isolation can lead to health problems or even death. To combat the issue, which is particularly relevant during the holidays, the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging recently jumpstarted a campaign to raise awareness of loneliness and its negative effects.

"We are encouraging people to stay ahead of the curve," said West Central Illinois Area Agency on Aging Field Representative Laura Megown. "We have great resources here, and rarely do we ever turn down a volunteer. It is a great way to feel needed and something to take pride in."

Senior isolation can stem from a number of different causes, such as a loss of income, inadequate social support or language and transportation barriers. The primary cause, Megown said, is the death of a spouse.

"We just wanted to offer ideas for people to help themselves," Megown said. "This is a safe place to come, where you will see a friendly smile."

When a lonely senior steps out from isolation, Megown said, "You can almost see the light coming on in their eyes."

The campaign offers a self-assessment for any senior who may be unaware they are isolating himself or herself. To take the assessment, visit whig.com/assets/pdf/Isolation_Brochure.pdf.

"It probably starts happening without the person even realizing it," Megown said. "Nobody likes to think about change, but being open to different living situations can connect you with people. You have to be open-minded."

Megown said maintaining a daily routine can significantly diminish the possibility of becoming isolated.

"It becomes a slippery slope, causing depression and anxiety. It is important to be aware it can happen to anybody," Megown said. "It can be really tough when people are in it. It takes some self-confidence and sometimes a nudge to get out of it."

For more information, call the West Central Illinois Case Coordination Unit located within the Quincy Senior and Family Resource Center at 217-222-1189 or 800-252-9027.