

Daily Tidings - August 29, 2017

Guest Opinion: Support our seniors

It was Friday afternoon. A woman called, politely asking for our help. Living in her car and calling from her sister's, she was hoping we could somehow assist her in using a computer (she didn't have one) to go online to fill in an application for subsidized housing Monday morning. My co-worker suggested we call one of our volunteer computer tutors. After I explained it, he said, "If she can be there at 9 a.m. Monday, I'll be happy to help her." This is one example of what our current Ashland Senior Program does daily. We help low-income seniors and the disabled pay utility bills; handle inquiries about elder abuse and identity fraud; provide free bus passes and sign-ups for AARP safe driving courses; help baby boomers seeking information regarding their parents' dementia diagnoses or medical bills; provide information on assisted living facilities, hospice/respite care and meals on wheels; assist in applying for Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security; plan field trips; and much more.

Many who call want a friendly voice and a safe place to come when they are overwhelmed by the challenges of aging or are isolated and separated from their loved ones. They want quiet socialization and a place to chat, read a book, or use wifi; they want activities designed for older people, and older bodies. They do not want to compete with 40- and 50-year-olds in a Zumba class.

I have volunteered and worked with the Ashland Senior Program for over a year. I've seen first-hand the social safety net that this program provides. I've met volunteers (some their 80s and 90s who've logged over 4,000 hours and been honored by President Obama) who give so much of their time and energy: nurses, computer and SHIBA experts, teachers of classes designed for older adults from yoga and Tai Chi to line dancing. They are the generous, kindhearted people who make our program, already operating on a tight budget, work.

Program Director Christine Dodson, on the job 14 years (and an additional 15 years with Senior Services), is the only full-time employee: the other four are part-time. One employee, 89 years old,

has been with the program for 17 years; another, a former case manager and adult foster home licensor for State Senior Services, has been working with seniors for 16 years.

Now, Ashland Parks and Recreation Director Michael Black and the APRC commissioners have voted to “reorganize” this time-honored program and lay off the entire staff, essentially wiping out a team and institutional memory of decades that provides the specialized networking of resources and compassionate service at the heart of the Senior Program.

What will ripping apart our Senior Program, designed to serve the needs of *all* seniors, say about Ashland’s values? There is so much about it that cannot, and should not, be quantified on a budget sheet. These changes have *not* been asked for by our community or the elders this program serves. It is clear from the public opposition that there has not been sufficient opportunity for genuine community input regarding changes being foisted upon our most invisible and vulnerable; changes that many feel will have devastating consequences. Over 40 years ago, Ashland civic leaders felt it was important to support their aging citizens. The mission statement: “The Ashland Senior Program strives to provide a support system to the older residents of Ashland, helping to enable them to live more independently and to continue as contributing members of the community.” Is there any mention of generating “revenue” for the APRC to justify the program’s existence?

We do not elect our commissioners to chastise us or to lord over us. We elect them to listen to us. I ask that they, and our elected City Council and mayor, stop for a moment and do just that.

— *Susanne Severeid lives in Ashland.*