

COMMUNITY

Inspired by pandemic, phone buddies are born

Friendly Voices volunteers provide isolated seniors with conversation, connection

By Kate Bradshaw

When the pandemic triggered widespread shutdowns last year, Menlo Park resident Laura Steuer had already put herself in lockdown, as she had a preexisting condition that made her vulnerable to COVID-19.

As the isolation wore on while she was stuck in her home, she said, she couldn't shake her thoughts about how much worse seniors in nursing homes must be feeling. Reports were emerging about seniors stuck in single rooms nearly 24/7 as caretakers tried to prevent transmission of a deadly virus that spread easily indoors. Some of the rooms didn't even have windows.

"I began to feel I had nothing to complain about," Steuer said in an interview.

So in early April 2020, she reached out to her friend Donne Davis, a fellow Menlo Park resident she'd met years ago through Toastmasters.

They decided to combine their experiences. Steuer had previously led a phone outreach nonprofit for

women healing from infidelity, while Davis runs a network for modern grandparents.

To help seniors facing isolation during the pandemic, they would pair volunteers with seniors and ask them to spend roughly 30 minutes per week connecting over the phone.

As the threat of the pandemic has dropped for those who are vaccinated, the acute loneliness crisis faced by seniors in lockdown may also wane, but the overall problem of loneliness isn't going anywhere, especially among older adults.

According to a report cited by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than one-third of adults age 45 and older feel lonely and nearly one-fourth of adults 65 and older are considered socially isolated or lacking social connections.

These can have serious health impacts. The CDC reports that social isolation significantly increases a person's risk of premature death from all causes, with impacts that may be similar to smoking,



Friendly Voices co-founders Donee Davis, left, and Laura Steuer chat in Davis' Menlo Park home on July 14.

obesity and physical inactivity, and is associated with about a 50% increased risk of dementia.

Davis said she was partly motivated to get involved with the project because of the experiences she'd seen her 98-year-old mother go through during the pandemic. Her mother lives in an assisted living community and has been confined to her room for about the past year and a half.

"I felt so sorry for her and so sad," she said. "This (program) is just what she needs. That made me want to get on board with it."

So they reached out and began recruiting volunteers. So far, many of the volunteers have come from their extended networks of friends and friends of friends. Of the volunteers, about 39 of 43 live within

the extended Peninsula region, Steuer said.

The volunteers started working with a cohort of isolated seniors in the Midwest, Steuer said, but, several months ago, Friendly Voices began a partnership with Avenidas in Palo Alto. It's an expansion of the program to work with seniors who are homebound or aging in place alongside those in assisted living facilities or nursing homes.

Volunteers are trained to document each call while maintaining privacy in accordance with federal laws, but the gist of the program comes down to engaging in a friendly conversation that's built around respect and flexibility, Steuer said.

They talk about how to respectfully navigate topics like religion and politics and help listen to and validate the experiences of their

conversation partner. Group leaders help fellow volunteers talk through what to do if any red-flag issues come up.

"I love helping people become better listeners," said Davis, who runs the trainings.

Steuer said that she's found the conversations she's had with her phone buddy to be rewarding. They differ in their upbringings, political and faith backgrounds but listen to each other's stories and connect over the woes of parenting, daily life, and the books and movies they like. Not every phone buddy pair connects as easily, but "we know every senior is glad to get the call," she said. "It means they have not been forgotten."

While there are other phone-based programs that do outreach to seniors, Steuer explained that Friendly Voices fits a unique niche, focusing more on conversations over the long term rather than welfare checks. She pointed to research that found that conversation, in and of itself, can provide value by improving memory and focus, helping to offer not just a balm for loneliness but tangible cognitive benefits.

In addition, using phone calls, as opposed to other technology-based platforms like FaceTime or Zoom, creates one less barrier for seniors to navigate in getting connected with others.

Information about the program is posted at friendlyvoices.org. ■

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Outsource

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board of education was scheduled to meet for a special meeting to approve a contract with Stride Learning Solutions, which provides customized online curriculum for K-12 students. With Stride, students will have asynchronous and synchronous instruction with a teacher from the company's online faculty.

Austin said the district sees the new program as an opportunity to provide an alternative to families whose children feel at risk or who can't wear a mask.

It "is for anyone that feels their health is at risk, and there's no criteria beyond that," Austin said. "There is no pre-existing health

condition requirement; there's no documentation of health issues requirement; and now, although I don't believe it's written in the guidelines, if somebody is opposed to wearing a mask, that can be a reason."

If the contract with Stride is approved on Thursday, the service will cost the district around \$3,000 per student or \$1.8 million for the school year, assuming a 6% student enrollment, Austin said. As of July 22, roughly 400 students in the district had requested a remote learning option in a recent non-binding district-wide survey, according to Austin.

"It's not a small number," he said. ■

Email Editorial Assistant Lloyd Lee at llee@pawekly.com.

Sewage

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researchers from the Joint Initiative for Metrology in Biology at SLAC National Accelerator Laboratory Stanford, the Stanford University School of Medicine Department of Genetics,

the Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute and the University of San Francisco Department of Engineering.

The sewage data is available online at covid19.sccgov.org/dashboard-wastewater. ■

Email Staff Writer Sue Dremann at sdremann@pawekly.com.

Public Agenda

A preview of Palo Alto government meetings next week

CITY COUNCIL ... The council has no meetings scheduled this week.