

# Finding New Ways to Support Aging in Place in Genesee County

For 23 years, the **Muriel H. Marshall Fund for the Aging** has been collaborating with partners to support innovative and practical programs that make it easier for older adults in Genesee County to live independently.

But the pandemic shutdown made everyday life tougher for everyone – including older adults.



Roxanne Marshall

The Marshall Fund Planning Team, which oversees grantmaking from the fund established by Muriel's daughter, Roxanne, set aside some funds and asked agencies to come up with creative ideas to address immediate or emerging concerns facing older adults.

Three programs were selected and supported with grants totaling \$28,325.

## **Help with Grocery Shopping**

*Got Groceries?* is a new – and free – service offered by the

Genesee County Office for the Aging (OFA) and available to adults 60 and older who are unable to do their own shopping, don't have the technical skills to order online, or have no other reliable supports to help them. After a six-month test period, it formally launched in July 2021.

It was immediately clear that many older adults not only needed to have their grocery shopping done for them, but also "to have someone bring them into the house and set them on the table," says Amy Swanson, OFA aging services specialist. "They really needed that extra step."

The program was tested using staff members who did shopping for three individuals to work out the kinks and provide fresh perspectives on the process that had been established. For example, it became necessary to exclude alcohol, prescriptions, and lottery tickets from shopping lists to avoid any liability issues that could arise, Swanson adds.

You might ask why not use an existing service like Instacart? During the pandemic especially, there were many instances where names, credit card data, addresses, and other sensitive information on Instacart clients was sold online. That was a key concern when this program was being started.

No money or personal credit card information changes hands. Participants start the program by mailing a check for \$200 to the Office for the Aging. Grocery store gift cards are purchased and that is what volunteer shoppers use to pay for the groceries. EBT/SNAP benefits cannot be used during these shopping excursions.

Shopping volunteers are being recruited, screened, and trained – and ideally will be matched with individuals who live nearby. If you are interested in volunteering, call the askmarshall help line (*a new service described later in the story*) at 585.815.7979 or email [askmarshall@co.genesee.ny.us](mailto:askmarshall@co.genesee.ny.us).

**A Safe Call or Scam**

When the pandemic forced the closure of most businesses, government offices, and institutions in March 2020, Genesee County Office for the Aging (OFA) employees were sent home to work. Keeping in touch and communicating with each other and clients involved in the various programs got complicated.

From a client perspective, calls were coming from phone numbers they didn't recognize. The employees making those calls were using cell phones and home landlines that shared their personal contact information.



Courtney Iburi

When Courtney Iburi, an aging services specialist, returned to the office after a three-month disruption, she found an invitation to a virtual social isolation impact summit in her inbox. She was intrigued.

“I have always been passionate about how social isolation issues are also health issues and that they don't get the attention they deserve. And now that we have all experienced isolation during the pandemic, we've got to be paying attention to this,” Iburi says.

During that summit she heard about a new technology under development to address the challenges of communicating with clients and staying connected. Iburi could envision many different uses for OFA and its clients.

With a grant from the Marshall Fund, OFA signed on as a beta test site for CallHub, a secure, web-based tool that makes communication between individuals and groups of people easier, quicker and safer. Staff and volunteers will use CallHub and its designated phone number to contact clients while keeping their personal numbers private. Clients will know when an incoming call is from OFA or their volunteer and not an unknown scammer trying to extend a car warranty or ask for money.

The first group testing the technology are folks who come to the Batavia meal program site. “We want their help in implementing processes for this technology,” says Iburi.

Each person signs a consent form to participate and have their phone number included in OFA’s CallHub database. Once the test group helps refine and improve the communications tool, it will be introduced to other individuals and groups in other programs.

During the pandemic, technology became a lifeline for many but didn’t benefit many older adults who are not computer savvy or interested in learning. “This technology, on the receiving end, will use the same simplistic technology they are used to using – even a rotary phone – that will allow us to easily and safely connect with them,” Iburi says.

Very soon, Iburi hopes that CallHub will allow OFA to send mass messages to clients, volunteers and staff – everything from a heat alert or fun facts about history to a warning from the sheriff’s office and reminders about upcoming programs.

“This could provide one more tool to battle social isolation,” she says.

### ***Focusing on Gratitude During the Pandemic and Beyond***

Living alone in a rural community can be isolating, but the pandemic exacerbated that loneliness with added sadness,

uncertainty, and anxiety.

Lucine Kauffman, coordinator of the Marshall-funded Library Visits Program (LVP), was hearing from volunteers that these feelings were common among many patrons of the Richmond Memorial Library's special designated services for older adults. During a workshop she attended of the New York Association of Psychiatric Rehabilitation Services, one of the speakers focused on the benefits of using a gratitude journal to manage intense emotions.

Scientific research even tells us that expressing gratitude can be beneficial in many ways, including increasing happiness and reducing depression.

Kauffman got the idea to introduce gratitude journals to help LVP patrons. "I really wanted people to make it their own – include their favorite song lyrics, a poem, or photos they liked from a newspaper or magazine."

With a \$450 grant, she ordered 280 notebooks, printed 750 brochures to explain how to use the journal, and created a long list of prompts, questions, and activities to inspire positive thinking. These included ideas such as:

- Choosing one photo from a photo album and write about why you are grateful for this photo and the people in it;
- Opening the window to look outside and identify something that makes you grateful;
- Writing about or pondering what brings you comfort, calm, and peace; or
- Thinking about how are you able to help others.

And writing in journals was something individuals could do on their own or with an LVP volunteer or with family members – all with the goal of keeping their spirits up and giving them something positive to talk about during visits or on phone or Zoom calls with family members or friends.

The journals were distributed to LVP patrons, and then Kauffman offered them to the Genesee County Office for the Aging and Catholic Charities of Buffalo's Home Visitation Program, which both offer Marshall-funded programs that serve older adults in Genesee County.

"In the end, we distributed more than we thought we would, which would indicate that it's a success," Kauffman says.

### ***askmarshall Debuts***

During the pandemic, the Marshall Fund also introduced new ways to connect with the many services it supports – online, by phone, and email.



A new website, [askmarshall.net](http://askmarshall.net), was introduced to share how the Marshall family of programs supports healthy aging and also provides easy access to resources for aging well. Older adults could also now get answers and connect to helpful resources through the new *askmarshall* helpline at 585.815.7979 or by sending an email to [askmarshall@co.genesee.ny.us](mailto:askmarshall@co.genesee.ny.us).

Since 1999, the Marshall Fund has distributed more than \$8.7 million in 239 grants to specifically support older adults in Genesee County. Detailed information on what the fund supports can be found on the Marshall Fund page of the Genesee County Office for the Aging website.