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options for independence

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THE GOOD LIFE

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Connection takes time and effort, but the rewards can be limitless.

By Gary Yuhas, MBA, Executive Director, LifePath

Established in 1963, Older Americans Month (OAM) is celebrated every May. Led by a federal agency, the Administration for Community Living (ACL), OAM is a time to recognize older Americans' contributions, highlight aging trends, and reaffirm commitments to serving the older adults in our communities.

This year's theme, "Powered by Connection," focuses on the profound impact that meaningful connections have on the well-being and health of older adults — a relationship underscored by the U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community, which was touched on in a previous *The Good Life* article.

LifePath program director Kate Moriarty, LICSW, shares that "meaningful connections have a profound impact on the health and well-being of older adults. It's not just about having someone to chat with; it's about increasing quality of life, moment by moment. Research has shown that the mental, emotional, and physical health benefits of social contact can far outweigh the harmful effects of other risk factors and boost life expectancy. Our relationships can also act as a buffer in difficult times. Connection, at its simplest form, is about acknowledging that we are all fellow beings sharing this journey called life and we all have much to offer each other."

Meaningful connections are certainly easier said than done. Connections, especially meaningful ones, take effort and energy. For some, just the thought of engagement may be too heavy a lift for their circumstances. Fortunately, LifePath and other local organizations offer a number of low-stress ways to engage with others. LifePath currently offers support groups for dementia caregivers and those who identify as part of the LGBTQIA+ community. LifePath also offers a series of Healthy Living Workshops that cover topics of wide interest. These are all activities and connection points that allow participants to select their level of engagement. It is possible to just join and listen, providing a low pressure environment. Certainly, there are also opportunities to engage further for those who are interested in doing so. We offer both in-person and virtual programming, which allows folks to select what works best for them.

Another way to engage with others is through your local senior center or council on aging. These organizations serve and support those who live in their respective areas. If you don't know your local center, a call to LifePath can provide that information. As I get to know the directors at these organizations, I see a common theme of individuals who are incredibly invested in their communities and who go out of their way to provide interesting and useful programming. Some of the programming is educational, like talks from local experts on various topics, or visits from local governmental representatives. Some of the programming is entertaining, like various comedy and musical performances. There are

book clubs, walking groups, exercise classes, yoga, veteran's programming, and so much more.

For example, I recently visited the Bernardston Senior Center, and Director Jennifer Reynolds gave us a tour. There was a sewing group, a foot care clinic, a group lunch, residents using public computers, and bingo, and that was just in one day! Opportunities like this abound across the area, and provide ways for individuals to connect with others around mutual topics of interest. Like the Bernardston Senior Center, other locations such as Athol, Charlemont, Greenfield, New Salem, Royalston, and Shelburne offer the opportunity to have a hot and healthy lunch with friends and neighbors.



**Gary Yuhas, MBA,
Executive Director**

Libraries are another great community resource, and offer a wide range of opportunities to make connections with others on your own terms. Libraries function as hubs in their communities.

Formal programming varies across the many libraries in our area, including games, trivia, knitting and crocheting, scavenger hunts, educational workshops, crafts, and other activities. LifePath is currently partnering with the libraries in Greenfield and Athol to provide informational sessions on our services. Other organizations often do the same, and these events are great ways to learn more about the organizations, what they have to offer, and what suggestions they may have for other ways to connect in your community.

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Opportunities to connect also exist for those who prefer to be at home or those who have mobility or transportation limitations. Free Healthy Living workshops are available by phone and Zoom,

Greenfield Community College offers virtual seminars for older adults, or you can request to be matched with a Phone Pal to chat with once a week, to name just a few.

Another way that many individuals are engaging is by volunteering, teaching, or mentoring. We see this regularly at LifePath, especially in folks who have retired, but are looking for ways to give back. Volunteering provides folks an opportunity to stay mentally engaged while sharing their time and talent. Our volunteers build relationships with other volunteers in their programs, and many report developing friendships outside of their volunteer activity. Volunteers report that providing various types of support is rewarding and enjoyable and gives them a new purpose in a different phase of their life. LifePath is currently seeking volunteers for our Meals on Wheels, Rides for Health, Grocery Shopping, Money Management, and Ombudsman programs. We are looking for folks across our entire service area.

Investing time with people to build new relationships can pay off in better physical, mental, and emotional health; social support; and feelings of wellness, belonging, and security. And, we shouldn't underestimate the power in discovering or nurturing deeper connections with family, chosen family, friends, colleagues, or neighbors. The wisdom of age has personally shown me that relationships can be very different at different points in our lives, and things that may have been barriers at an earlier time are no longer relevant or important later on. Connection takes time and effort, but the rewards can be limitless.

If you would like to learn more about LifePath programs or volunteer opportunities, please visit our website at www.lifepathma.org or call (413) 773-5555.