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THE GOOD LIFE

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Assessing the Last Year with Gratitude

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As I write this article, I have recently passed my one year anniversary at LifePath. Reflecting on LifePath's achievements over the past year brings a profound sense of gratitude toward the volunteers, staff, organizations, and community members that made it all possible.

Just over a year ago, in May 2023, we began an initiative to help veterans stay in their homes by reducing risks, increasing functional access, and improving their safety through the Helping Homebound Heroes program, as the first such grant recipient in Massachusetts. Meals on Wheels America and The Home Depot Foundation made our Home Safety program possible through this \$25,000 grant.

June 2023 saw us receive \$17,265 from the New England Rural Health Association for our Healthy Living program, allowing us to continue to offer workshops that are evidence-based, free, and open to people with one or more long-term health conditions (like diabetes, heart disease, arthritis, and chronic pain), as well as their caregivers and loved ones.

In August 2023, The Healey-Driscoll Administration awarded LifePath over \$450,000 for the creation of an innovative Community Engagement Center (CEC) where caregivers can find respite and information, and our two-day-a-week supportive day program was up and running in November. The necessity of more support in this area was recognized this May, when LifePath was awarded an additional \$28,430 grant from the Administration to broaden Supportive and Social Day Programs. This grant program is designed to help community organizations expand or launch programs for older adults and individuals with Alzheimer's disease and related dementias in their community, which are sorely lacking in our region.

Also in August, LifePath became the first nonprofit in Western Mass to be certified as a Service Enterprise by national volunteer organization Points of Light. Achieving Service Enterprise certification is a prestigious accomplishment for an organization, and those who earn this achievement join the top 11 percent of nonprofits nationwide in volunteer management and organizational performance.

November 2023 saw us launch the Age- and Dementia-Friendly Action Plan, a comprehensive strategy developed by a community to ensure that its infrastructure, services, and policies are designed and implemented in a way that supports and accommodates the needs of people of all ages, particularly older adults. These action plans are specifically focused on creating environments that are accessible, inclusive, and supportive for older adults, aiming to promote their health, well-being, and active participation within the community. A culmination of three years of work, and supported by the World Health Organization and AARP, the plan would not have been possible without support from the Franklin Regional Council of Governments, city and town leaders, active citizens, councils on aging, and so many others.

The fall also saw Marvin "Marv" Kelley, LifePath Rides for Health volunteer and Citizens Advisory Board member, recognized by AARP as a Nominee for the AARP 2023 Andrus Award for Community Service. The Rides for Health Program launched in 2015,

with Marv as one of the original volunteers. He began with two trips the first month, and since then he has helped 39 individuals get to medical appointments totaling over 334 round trips covering 12,168 miles. The Andrus Award is AARP's most prestigious state volunteer award for community service.

January 2024 began with the fantastic news that MCOA was awarding LifePath a \$22,900 grant to support elder dementia programs. This funding allows us to continue to offer dementia-related services free of charge and to build our capacity to respond to the rising need for dementia support by training additional staff, including at least one Spanish-speaking staff member, who can provide dementia coaching in Spanish.

In addition, we expanded the assistance available to help individuals find the resources they need to live independently and thrive in their communities. This assistance includes the Community Transition Liaison Program, whose goal is to meet with and assist clients who wish to return home from a nursing facility, which can be a daunting and complex transition. This free service, available to individuals with disabilities aged 22 years and older, follows the person until they leave the facility and are back in a community setting.

Another example of expanded assistance is the Benefits Enrollment Program, courtesy of a new grant award of \$125,000 from The National Council on Aging and supported by the Administration for Community Living, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. This allows our Benefit Support Specialists to help with different applications such as MassHealth, the Medicare Savings Program, SNAP, or LIHEAP. LifePath aims to enroll 400 people in 1-2 benefits programs each over the next 19 months. We will partner with our SHINE program, which provides free, independent Medicare counseling to over 3,600 older people each year, to identify and enroll eligible people.

Last month, we learned that we received another two years of grant funding from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to support our Elder Mental Health Outreach Team, who deliver comprehensive therapeutic interventions, intensive case management, advocacy, and education to older adults. The support includes addressing basic needs, assisting with applications, accessing community resources, completing well-being checks, and navigating complex, fragmented systems in our community. Services vary from one-time coaching sessions to ongoing weekly support.

These are only some of LifePath's accomplishments from the previous year. Space doesn't permit us to list them all or thank everyone that made them possible. Together, they have made our community a better place to live for older adults and those living with disabilities. A common theme across these many accomplishments is the teamwork required to make these achievements happen, and the continual need for grant support to create, support, and continue programming. As a non-profit organization, grants, gifts, and donations are vital to providing our essential services.

These accomplishments highlight the collaborative spirit of our teams and community, and the many impressive organizations with whom we collaborate to support those living here. Looking back also makes me excited for our future, and provides an inspiring lead up to our 50th Anniversary celebration, happening later this year!