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Championing Our Health: Looking Beyond the Doctor's Office

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Lynne Feldman

As communities across the country recognize Older Americans Month this May, the theme *Champion Your Health* highlights the importance of staying active, safe, and supported while aging. We can put effort into both championing our own health and helping make health possible for others.

When people think about health, they often think about doctors, medicine, and hospitals. Good medical care is very important. It identifies problems, treats illness, and saves lives. But medical care is only part of the picture. It is responsible for about 20% of health outcomes.

The other 80% comes from the *social determinants of health*. These include our everyday surroundings and experiences such as where people live, what they eat, how they get around, and how connected they feel to others.

This means health is not just about going to the doctor. It is also about what happens in homes, neighborhoods, and daily life.

What Shapes Health

Social determinants of health include safe housing, healthy food, transportation, income, and social support. They also include feeling included, having a purpose, and staying mentally well. A person may receive good medical care, but if their surroundings do not support it, they may still struggle with their health.

For example, a person with asthma can see a doctor and receive medicine that helps, but if their home has unhealthy levels of mold due to an ongoing roof leak, the asthma may still worsen. Another example is a person who has undergone surgery but cannot get to follow-up appointments due to transportation problems. Without follow-up care, it may take longer to get well, or the individual may not fully recover.

The key idea is simple. Health is shaped by more than medical care. It is shaped by how people live every day.

What We Can Do

Some parts of life are out of our control. But there are still many things we can do to improve our health.

If you are sick, focus on getting well. Contact LifePath at 413-773-5555 if you have trouble accessing the care you need or need information or help at home. Once you are feeling better, consider building a healthy habit or two to help you stay well. The following are some healthy habits to focus on:

Eat well and stay active

This can include walking groups, access to fresh food, and safe places to be active. Small steps can lead to better health over time.

Stay connected

Strong relationships help us feel supported. Spending time with friends, family, and neighbors matters. Community events, shared meals, and group activities can help reduce loneliness.

Keep your mind active

Learning, hobbies, and volunteering support brain health and give us a sense of purpose.

Speak up and seek support

Asking questions, looking for help, and sharing our needs helps us make healthy changes.

If you are relatively healthy, you can continue building healthy habits, and you can also ask what you can do to help your community support the well-being of everyone in it.

How Community Helps

Champion Your Health is not just about individual choices. Safety, access to food, and reliable transportation are all

vital. This is where LifePath plays an important role.

LifePath is the Area Agency on Aging for its region. It helps older adults, people with disabilities, and caregivers. Its goal is to help people stay in their homes and live with dignity. LifePath offers many programs that support health in daily life. These include:

- Nutrition programs that provide healthy meals
- Transportation services that help people get to appointments
- Support for caregivers
- Help at home so people can live safely

These services help prevent the need for more costly medical care and help people feel better. They support the everyday needs that medical care alone cannot address.

Helping People Age Well

The Age and Dementia Friendly program is a way that LifePath and many other organizations are trying to make our communities better for people of all ages. This work looks at policies, systems, and the environment. The goal is to make it easier for people to stay healthy as they grow older.

This can include:

- Safer places to walk
- Better transportation options
- Affordable and safe housing
- More chances to connect with others

LifePath works with partners to support these changes. Together, these efforts help build communities where people can age well and stay active.

For example, a group of older adults in Colrain started a walking group and distributed a map of “safer” roads to walk on. By allowing people to more easily get outside and be active, this initiative helped residents of all abilities access the outdoors.

Also, the towns of Ashfield, Buckland, and Northfield have

all invested in assistive hearing technology that helps people with hearing loss to continue to take part in meetings. This technology helps people hear better in noisy or large spaces by sending sound directly from a microphone to the listener's hearing aid or earbuds with no background noise, reverberation, or static. Other towns have used closed captioning in Zoom meetings. With tools to help everyone take an active role in meetings, older adults are able to stay better connected to their community.

It's important to note that these examples were a result of individuals putting time and effort into the championing of everyone's health, not just their own. If you would like to help, contact me, Lynne Feldman, at LFeldman@LifePathMA.org or 413-829-9221.

A Shared Responsibility

Taking care of health is not just about medical visits. It is about daily life and shared support. People, families, and communities all play a role. Healthy habits, strong connections, and access to resources all affect our health. Organizations like LifePath help make it easier for communities to support one another by supporting health initiatives and by connecting people with services that help improve the conditions that affect their health.

Looking Ahead

In addition to championing our own health through habits and medical care, it can also help us to think about health in a broader way. We can ask:

- Do people have what they need in our area to live well?
- Are there opportunities for strong social connections?
- What changes can help improve health for everyone?

If you have ideas on how to champion our health, or if you need help to achieve your own health goals, please contact us. We'd love to work together with you to improve health for all of us in Franklin County and the North Quabbin areas.

Health is something that is built every day. With support, awareness, and shared effort, communities can create a healthier future for all.

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