

Seniors contact service looking for volunteers



By Tony Pearson

Trudy Edwards is a very sociable person. But her socializing isn't just the normal exchange of news or gossip with friends and neighbours. She socializes with other seniors to make sure that they are safe and well. She is part of a program called "RUOK", or to spell it out, "Are you OK"? A daily phone call to check on isolated seniors. RUOK is run by Community Care North Hastings, as part of their "Security Reassurance" service.

Edwards, who has been an RUOK volunteer for eight years, starts just before 8 AM on weekday mornings. She calls anywhere from five to ten people; the number fluctuates, depending on the number of people needing the service, and the number of volunteers available. Right now, Edwards has eight telephone visits each morning. Although the call can be brief, perhaps just to discuss an upcoming medical appointment, Edwards has built a rapport with each of her clients, and so they tend to talk for a while, sharing experiences and often comparing memories. She reports that two of her calls are to former Newfoundlanders, who always have lots of stories to share. The calls also enable people to keep up with the latest news, and discuss current events, as well as hobbies and other interests. And Trudy makes sure she knows her clients' birthdays; she likes to sing "Happy Birthday" over the phone on these occasions.

"People appreciate both the sense of security from the calls, as well as the opportunity to talk," Edwards states. "Generally these people live alone, as widows or widowers. They may have mobility issues, which confine them mostly to their homes. So as a volunteer, I feel needed. It's very personally satisfying to know that you represent an important daily contact for such people." Edwards reports that the calls also help her learn new information. "There are so many personalities and life experiences among the clients. For example, I've learned a lot about vitamins and natural health. I've also learned about interesting Internet sites to visit."

Security though is the focus of the service. If there is a problem, Edwards reports this to Community Care, who can access assistance. She also reports if and when she has been unable to make contact after three attempts. Sometimes a neighbour or family member can be contacted; if there is still no response, 9-1-1 can be called. In case of emergencies between calls, clients can obtain a Crisis Alert safety device. This is attached to the phone, so that a client can simply press a button to get assistance 24/7. To ensure that help can be summoned even if a client can't get to the phone, they can get a wireless wristband or pendant transmitter, which can send the necessary signal.

The need for seniors' security services is growing, given the above-average number of seniors living in the North Hastings area. RUOK clients live not only in Bancroft, but also from Cardiff to Coe Hill to Bolter to Lake St. Pierre, and range in age from 65 to 95. Although they may have physical restrictions, all remain mentally sharp, and keen to remain in their own homes. However, the number of volunteers hasn't kept pace with the need.

?We need to make sure that there's a dependable human connection for everyone who needs it,? Trudy Edwards insists. ?They need to know someone cares. A phone call or a visit may be their only regular connection to the community. So it's an important task, as well as a rewarding one.?

Anyone interested in becoming a volunteer caller or visitor can contact Sarah Krieger, Community Care volunteer coordinator, at (613) 332-4700. All volunteers will receive an orientation to the agency and its services.