

Volunteers get groceries for 80-plus homebound clients



Diane Haines
Community Editor

The volunteers deliver bags of groceries. They bring companionship. They offer friendship and act as surrogate family members. They allow homebound individuals to lead independent lives.

Virginia Statile, 87, of Westwood coordinates the volunteer shopping program for HomeCare Options of Paterson, which uses 60 shoppers to help 80 or so clients who can not get to the store themselves.

Statile recruits individuals who are committed to establishing long-term ties with clients, volunteers who

JERSEY MOSAIC

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Mary Hafele, left, has been getting Della Conti's groceries to her for five years. Mary passes the groceries through the back window of Della's Little Falls home.

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/ Special to the Herald News

Jersey Mosaic: Help for the homebound

Continued from B1

will care about them and look after their best interests.

"These people are not just volunteers," she says. "They become friends."

Statile brings a wealth of knowledge to organizing the volunteer effort. She worked for 43 years for the Visiting Homemakers of Hudson County. When she started at the agency, it had 28 volunteers; by the time she retired, there were 1,000.

While still with the Hudson County organization, Statile became a member of the board of directors of HomeCare Options. She was asked to fill in temporarily for the director of home shopping volunteers. Nearly a decade later, she still has the job.

For more than 50 years, HomeCare Options has offered healthcare and social services to the elderly in their homes. The grocery program serves disabled individuals and clients older than 60 at no cost.

The agency conducts thorough background checks of volunteers, she says - people whose numbers include nurses, a landscape architect, a banker, high school students and a mom who brings along her children.

"She tells the kids, 'Let's go shopping for grandma,' Statile says.

The homebound clients call, she says, and tell her things like, "Thanks for sending an angel. She's just wonderful. I don't know what I would do without her."

Statile says agencies depend on volunteers because home health care has changed drastically in the past few years. Under Medicare, aides used to be available five hours a day, five days a week; now they are limited to two hours a day, two days a week. The reduction in hours leaves no time for both household chores and shopping. The volunteers have assumed the shopping duties.

Della Conti, 79, of Little Falls has had a volunteer shopper for about five years. Unable to drive, she needs help - which she found through a newspaper article.

Her volunteer helper is Mary Hafele of Little Falls, who works at William Paterson University in Wayne.

"Mary is wonderful," says Conti. "She is very helpful and patient." Because parking is a problem at Conti's apartment complex, Hafele arranges for all deliveries, including groceries, to be passed through a back window.

"It sounds funny but it works," says Conti.

Hafele, 64, who has been with the volunteer program since 1999, says some of her clients need shopping done once a week; others, like Conti, prepare grocery lists for a whole month. Hafele says it takes about two hours to do the monthly shopping.

"You have to give back to the community," she says. "I'm committed to that. I have the time and I can do it."

And Hafele exhibits the type of dedication that Statile seeks. A few years ago, Hafele was helping an elderly man in Wayne who had a little white dog but no one to take it when he entered a nursing home.

"I'm not a dog person," says Hafele, who took in the dog herself. "He was a West Highland White Terrier, a purebred. My husband and son weren't happy because he had to be walked."

They changed their minds, however, when she found a \$100 bill while walking the dog.

"His name was Lucky and I guess he was," Hafele says. "You do what you can. It's very gratifying to be able to help."

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