



Virtual classes and gatherings are keeping seniors engaged during this period of social isolation.

PHOTO COURTESY OF TARA RUSZKOWSKI

Staying Active in Social Isolation

A variety of local offerings allows for days filled with activity.

BY MARILYN CAMPBELL
THE CONNECTION

Cora Foley, an active 68-year-old of Burke, Virginia, has been able to maintain her social life while coronavirus stay-at-home orders are in effect. She's using her predilection for innovation to help other seniors do the same. Foley co-founded the Senior Center Without Walls of Burke, West Springfield and Great Falls, which offers social programming to seniors in those communities. She created a corresponding website to include online social offerings.

"When the coronavirus 'stay home' lockdowns were imposed, "I expanded the website to include other classes that are usually offered on-site, like line dancing and Zumba," said Foley. "From April 1st through the 17th, the website has recorded 451 visitors and 1,789 views, so it has been a daily help to many residents, particularly seniors."

The new normal of not leaving home except for emergencies can leave many, including seniors and others who are most susceptible to contracting coronavirus, with a social void in their lives. Seniors can join classes and activities ranging from yoga and fitness classes to concerts and lunch with friends.

"Isolation and loneliness has been one of our ongoing concerns for older adults prior to coronavirus and we remain committed to help older adults establish and maintain meaningful social connections during this time and beyond," said Rachel Coates, Director of the Agency on Aging Arlington Aging and Disability Services Division.

Arlington County is also working collaboratively to keep the social lives of area senior intact, says Coates. "In partnership with Arlington Adult Day Program, Developmental Disability Services and other County programs [including] Parks 55+ programs and libraries, we are making phone calls, mailing activity kits... and hosting music and socialization skills classes virtually," she said.

Such initiatives offer options and an outlet from consuming the often-conflicting news of coronavirus

happenings in solitude.

"Every one-in-7 individuals living in Fairfax County right now is 65 and over," said Evan Braff of the Department of Neighborhood and Community Services in Fairfax County co-founded the Senior Center Without Walls of Burke, West Springfield and Great Falls. "We recognize that this is a scary time for all of us especially for older adults. "Since we've been in this situation, we've gotten creative and innovative."

Part of that innovation is creating virtual versions of the activities that seniors enjoyed in brick-and-mortar settings. "It is truly a collaborative effort to develop the virtual senior center," said Amanda Rogers of the Fairfax County Neighborhood & Community Services. "Everything is being developed in coordination with other county agencies as well, such as Family Services, Libraries, Housing, and the Health Department."

In addition to routine services such as delivering meals and providing transportation to medical appointments, local seniors have options for virtual opportunities for social and recreational activities.

For example, the Caregiver Program in Montgomery County now has two online sources of information for seniors. "Rather than disconnect at home during the COVID-19 uncertainty, it is important that we...develop new social connections...and nurture personal health and wellness," said Lylie Fisher, Caregiver Support Program, Area Agency on Aging, Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services.

That effort, says Fisher, includes the County's Engage@HOME, YouTube channel as well as an e-newsletter and blog where seniors can find services including community support groups, telephone and online activities as well Covid-19 updates.

For seniors who need technical assistance, Fairfax County has technicians who are only a phone call away to assist with needs ranging from downloading a video conferencing app to understanding the basics of the Internet. "Technology can be scary for older adults, but we've actually been teaching older adults how to use Skype and Zoom for a while" said Braff.

Those lessons have led to success stories that have given seniors the skills necessary to weather the current storm of uncertainty. "What's really exciting to see was a 98 year old woman posting on Twitter," said Braff. "It's great that you have someone who's 98 and who's able to post on Twitter."



PHOTO COURTESY OF TARA RUSZKOWSKI

Fairfax City Mayor David Meyer speaks to the City Jobs crew at Stafford Park.

'A Bit of Normalcy in a Tumultuous Time'

City Jobs program keeps restrooms open in Stafford Park.

BY BONNIE HOBBS
THE CONNECTION

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, people have been constantly reminded to stay home and wash their hands. But that's tough to do for people without homes or access to clean water. And locked restrooms, due to closures of libraries and other public places, only make matters worse.

But thanks to a partnership between Fairfax City and The Lamb Center – a daytime, drop-in shelter serving the homeless – this problem has been solved locally. And it was easy to do, since the connections were already in place.

Under the already-existing City Jobs program, some 20 homeless men and women from The Lamb Center are paid to do a variety of tasks for Fairfax City's Parks and Recreation Department. Via this innovative initiative, these workers clean and beautify City parks and other outdoor spaces for the public's enjoyment.

So – recognizing the increased vulnerability of its homeless citizens during the COVID-19 crisis – Fairfax City looked to City Jobs and The Lamb Center for a solution. As a result, the City made a spe-

cial agreement to reopen its Stafford Park restrooms, weekdays, from 8 a.m.-8 p.m., and weekends, 10 a.m.-8 p.m. In exchange, a City Jobs employee cleans and maintains these restrooms at no charge to the City.

Calling them a "very welcome refuge," Lamb Center Board Chairman Tara Ruszkowski said, "The Stafford restrooms provide homeless residents sleeping in tents around the area a much-needed place to wash up, charge a phone and start the day on a good note."

Fairfax Mayor David Meyer is also pleased. "The City Jobs program has proven immensely successful for our community," he said. "We have the opportunity to keep our parks in excellent condition because of the fine work of the Lamb Center crews. This is so important now. With so many citizens trying to be safe but needing to go outside, many more residents are visiting our parks – and we're able to keep them clean and well-maintained."

So, added Ruszkowski, "It's not only homeless residents who benefit. Delivery drivers, police and families visiting the park know there are clean public facilities – a bit of normalcy in a tumultuous time."