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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**Though Older Americans Month Ramps up Around the Region,
It's Really Business As Usual!**

In following with United States presidents since 1963 the White House has again proclaimed May 2024 as Older Americans Month (OAM): “This month, we celebrate older Americans’ contributions by recommitting to those ideals and defending everyone’s right to live full lives with dignity and respect. We will always have their backs.” The Virginia Governor has proclaimed May as Older Virginians Month to recognize the state's nearly 1.9 million residents who are 60 or older. And again this year, each of our five county governments (Culpeper, Fauquier, Madison, Orange and Rappahannock) have also proclaimed May as Older Americans month.

“As the older adult population grows, we are gratified the demographic is given due respect by leaders for the positive contributions they have made to society, and for the wisdom they are able to pass down to younger generations. In a time where ageism still prevails, we are especially grateful to our region for the impactful steps it has taken to honor older adults”, says Ellen Phipps, Executive Director of Aging Together.

Led by a federal agency, the Administration for Community Living (ACL) <https://acl.gov/oam/2024/older-americans-month-2024>, OAM is a time to recognize older Americans’ contributions, highlight aging trends, and reaffirm commitments to serving the older adults in our communities. The 2024 theme is **Powered by Connection**, which recognizes the profound impact meaningful relationships and social connections have on our health and wellbeing. A year ago, the Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthym, released his report The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community, stating: *“Given the significant health consequences of loneliness and isolation, we must prioritize building social connection the same way we have prioritized other critical public health issues such as tobacco, obesity, and substance use disorders. Together, we can build a country that’s healthier, more resilient, less lonely, and more connected.”* In fact, research has shown that loneliness is as bad for people’s health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day!

In April Aging Together partnered with Encompass Community Supports, the Prince William Agency on Aging, and Virginia Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services (VADARS) for a first-time mini conference specifically designed around the conversation on social isolation in our regions. “A lot of discussion and good ideas came from this event”, says Phipps. “We definitely all agree this is an epidemic and we are looking at creative ways to replicate what is working, and to brainstorm solutions to fill gaps.”

Some of what already exists is all about creating and facilitating connections. “This is a great opportunity to highlight current resources that specifically help older adults engage in our region”, says Phipps.

Perhaps one of the best examples is **the Regional Transportation Collaborative (RTC)** (www.rtcmc.org/), the force behind a vast alliance of organizations and people that serve those who are unable to drive, and in which Aging Together participates as a core partner to support outreach and to find volunteer drivers. Without transportation many older adults aren’t able to connect with local services that can help them overcome obstacles to achieving or maintaining meaningful relationships, including doctors, faith groups, and social engagements. The goal of the partnership is to improve our community’s mobility together. “Aging Together’s significant connection to the primary service audience, older adults, enables this special population’s voices to be heard, their needs to be prioritized, and helps to justify creative solutions!”, says Kristin Lam Peraza, the collaborative’s Mobility Manager. In the past five years, the RTC has coordinated over 60,000 requests for rides from older adults throughout the region and of those, more than 40,000 rides were provided primarily by volunteer transportation partners. With the Aging population growing rapidly and vulnerabilities increasing, the need for services will likely always outweigh the available supports, however, the data collected via Aging Together’s community meetings and service provision, have helped initiate a rise in response to volunteering, offering optimism to a demographic whose needs continue to evolve.

On the flipside, **volunteering brings great connections** while providing a sense of purpose and well-being. In our region there are many opportunities to volunteer, bringing one’s skills, interests and hobbies into play and helping to reverse the sense of disengagement that life changes like retirement bring. Those opportunities can be found at places like Aging Together (including volunteer driving), The PATH Volunteer Hub (<https://www.letsvolunteer.org/>) which has an aggregate search site for the region, or Generations Central Adult Day Center, among others.

Generations Central Adult Day Center (<https://generationscentral.org/>), located in Culpeper Baptist Church, has a dedicated program where activities are centralized between the center’s older adult participants and the children in the church’s childcare center. This intergenerational interaction brings enjoyment and value to each participant’s day, while also building a learned sense of respect and understanding for generational differences. For those who live with dementia, working with children is easier and offers less stress because kids just don’t really “care” about cognitive issues. And for the kids, it’s like having built-in grandparents they can visit regularly.

In the last two years, Aging Together, in conjunction with **Dementia Friendly** Central Virginia, has challenged the professional and business communities in our region to engage in short training sessions where they learn about the types of dementias and how they can manifest in a customer or visitor. The program has a point: Be welcoming to all who may enter your place of business. And people living with dementia and their care partners are encouraged to connect with their communities. Ultimately the result can be a big win-win. “This was a humbling experience for us”, says Phipps. “We thought this would take months or even years to get off the ground. Instead, we almost can’t keep up!” Aging Together uses volunteers for much of the initiative and that creates a supply-and-demand situation while volunteers are recruited to expand the initiative after going through training. “Our communities have really stepped up to the plate. Our region is absolutely amazing!” says Phipps.

Additionally, the **Senior Services Collaborative**, facilitated by Aging Together, is a collaboration of organizations dedicated to improving quality of life for older adults with a focus on access to food and social isolation. The social isolation task force meets monthly to learn about best practices throughout the country and beyond and to take action in our region. Social isolation was already a concern for older adults before Covid 19, but of course became so much more of a concern with the pandemic. “Suddenly we all were confronted with this challenge of sourcing food and medical needs to those who were isolated. Many had already been at home for a long time, unable to drive or use cell phones,” says Phipps. “There’s often a silver lining that comes from dire situations. Covid brought social isolation out of the shadows, but we still have a lot of work to do”.

“We especially relate to this year’s theme”. says Phipps. “This is what Aging Together is about – making connections. Helping to bring our partners together to explore practical solutions; and helping to replicate best practices where possible.”

For more information on social isolation, or on regional resources, contact Ellen Phipps at the email above. Or go to www.agingtogether.org.

The mission of Aging Together is, through partnerships, to connect people to communities and resources to improve quality of life as we age.

Aging Together serves the counties of Culpeper, Fauquier, Orange, Madison and Rappahannock.

www.agingtogether.org

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Photos follow



Paul Bates, Chairman Culpeper Board of Supervisors, presents the Culpeper County Proclamation for Older Americans Month to Ellen Phipps





Senior Services Collaborative Meeting at PATH in Warrenton.



April 24 Accelerator Conference for Social Isolation.