

Making that call day after day



CARL E. FEATHER / Star Beacon

JESSIE KENNEDY, 79, works in the Telephone Reassurance Program at the Ashtabula County Senior Center. She calls 54 seniors every weekday.

NORTHCOAST WOMEN

Five days
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Jessie
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phone
checking
on the
welfare
of her
peers

By CARL E. FEATHER
Lifestyle Editor

Betty, a senior citizen who lives alone in the Harbor, doesn't need to set her alarm clock Monday through Friday.

She has Jessie Kennedy. Every weekday morning between 9:15 and 9:30 a.m., Jessie reminds Betty it's time to rise and shine.

"She's really my alarm clock if I oversleep from being up late at night," says Betty, 71.

Jessie, 79, works for the Telephone Reassurance Program, which is housed at the Ashtabula County Senior Center on Main Avenue. The position is funded with a grant from the District XI Area on Aging, and Jessie is hired through the Senior Aides Program.

Telephone Reassurance provides a friendly telephone call every weekday morning to shut-in seniors throughout Ashtabula County. Jessie says it is usually a child of the shut-in who initiates the program. The child may live out of town or otherwise be unable to stop by or call their parent's home once a day. By having Jessie call every morning, they can be assured another human will check on their welfare.

The Ashtabula resident works from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. calling the 54 persons on her list.

If Jessie cannot reach the senior, or if she senses there is a medical or other problem the family member should be aware of, she calls the contact person. Police also can be notified to check on the senior's welfare.

"I just call and see how they are doing," Jessie says. "I make sure they are up and well enough to answer the phone. I have

some who are in pretty bad shape."

Jessie says that while she cannot think of an instance where one of her calls made the difference between life and death, they have made a lot of cloudy days a bit brighter.

"It helps me a lot," says Mary, a Jefferson senior who has been receiving calls for more than a year. "She checks on me in the morning before 9 a.m. She's pretty prompt."

Betty, the Harbor woman Jessie calls, says the daily call is especially important to her as a diabetic because it also reminds her to take her morning insulin injection. And it provides socialization for a few minutes each day.

"I live alone, so I enjoy Jessie's call every morning," Betty says. "She's a very friendly person."

Jessie, a native of Oak Hill, W.Va., identifies with the people she calls. A daughter died in 1961, her husband in 1968. Although her son now lives with her, she understands what it's like to be lonely. And she knows the struggles that come with physical limitations; she has problems with her legs, so the Telephone Reassurance job is ideal for her.

"I cry along with them when they have bad luck, and I pray for them a lot," she says.

Jessie says it is easy to take the job home with her and continue to worry about the folks she talked to that morning. "It doesn't bother me as bad now as it used to," she says. "It used to keep me awake at night. But after four years, you get to know the people and you sympathize with them."

Her calls always start with a cheery "Good morning" and "How are you today?" If the senior is a Meals-on-Wheels pro-

gram participant, Jessie alerts them to any delivery issues for that day.

Almost every call involves conversation about the weather, especially if there's snow in the air.

"They are all so happy when the sun is out," she says. "You can tell it in their voices when the sun is shining. And when it's cloudy, you can sense it. We talk a lot about the weather."

They also talk about their children and grandchildren, their aches and pains, chronic illnesses and doctor appointments. Jessie makes a note of any upcoming appointments during the hours she would be calling so she'll know the unanswered phone is not a sign of trouble.

Occasionally, Jessie learns that one of the seniors has reached the point where his condition requires assisted living or nursing home care and he will be removed from the call list. That is increasingly an issue because new participants are not coming into the program to replace those who have left.

"I was up to 64 at one time, but now I'm down to about 54," she says.

Troy Bailey, executive director of the Ashtabula Senior Center, hopes they can increase the number of people on Jessie's call list so the program can continue.

"The biggest problem with the program is that people who need the service are not aware of it," he says.

Seniors or their family members who want to start the weekday calls can do so by stopping by the Senior Center and providing contact information. Bailey says he would like to see the program extended to weekends, as well, by using volunteers.

"We need more folks to call," Bailey says. To sign up or get more information, call 998-6750.

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