

**The Senior  
Companion Program:**



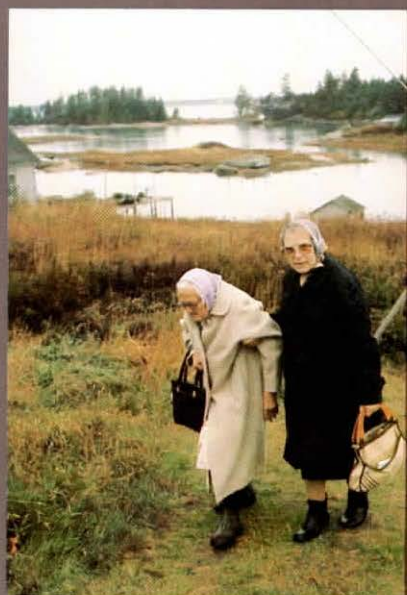
**The Finest Tradition  
of Neighbor helping Neighbor**

## The Senior Companion Program



**1974-1984**

For ten years, Senior Companions have responded with patience, humor, commitment and wisdom to the needs of frail adults. Through deeds of caring, gestures of assistance and expressions of love, Senior Companions help others enjoy a brighter future.



**"I know the doctor saved my life. But you gave me the courage to continue it."**

An elderly woman was writing her best friend—another elderly woman who, though they had met only recently, had been close to her side during a medical battle too arduous to win alone. The two found each other through a remarkable federal program that brings together seniors in need and seniors able to help. Its principle is as basic as love itself: Provide an open heart and outstretched arms, and weakness finds strength in the bond that forms.

The Senior Companion Program, funded by the national volunteer agency ACTION, marks its 10th Anniversary in 1984. Modest in size but mighty in spirit, the program enables some 5,000 older Americans to help their more frail peers live proud and independent lives.

Most Senior Companions serve the homebound elderly—those needing daily attention such as help with shopping, visiting the doctor, and managing their households.

An urgent need for many homebound elderly is help in conquering the frightening prospects of loneliness and isolation. Living alone with diminishing faculties can indeed be overwhelming. **"The frail older person struggles, often against tremendous odds, to stay independent, preferring the risks of being alone at home to the security of institutionalized living,"** stresses a volunteer coordinator. Without their Senior Companions, many eventually would tire of fighting such odds and resign themselves to life in an institution.

In fact, one hospital estimates that 46 percent of the elderly patients it discharges would go to nursing homes if Senior Companions were not available.

Volunteers also serve the terminally ill, allowing them to live out their lives at home in comfort and dignity. Other Senior Companions help elderly people readjust to the challenges of normal life following hospitalization for an acute illness, a drug or alcohol problem, or a mental health crisis.

Regardless of whom or where they help, Senior Companions are their friends' staunchest advocates, linking them to appropriate community resources and seeing that they receive all the benefits to which they are entitled. Most importantly, volunteers devote themselves to others by sharing their most precious possession: their time. They usually visit several clients daily, spending a total of 20 hours with them during a typical week.



Says one homebound man of his Senior Companion: "When Earl comes to my door, he's as welcome as the flowers in May."

The special beauty of the Senior Companion Program is the bond of friendship born of shared experience—elderly people, many of whom have spent their lifetimes caring for others, joined one with another.

For the older person suddenly in need of help, his or her reversal of roles—from caregiver to client—can be especially disturbing. The empathy and understanding of the Senior Companion are vital in instilling the trust, confidence, and positive attitude necessary for successful independent living.

As a member of a hospital discharge team, one volunteer helps counsel "difficult" patients who have undergone heart surgery. She credits her success with her clients to the experience of her own triple bypass operation.

In a particularly successful alcohol abuse project, all the Senior Companions themselves are recovering alcoholics. Through their testimony and example, they offer a new dimension of encouragement and hope.

"I try to return the love and compassion given me by unknown people when I had no self-respect, no dignity, no hope of sobriety," relates one volunteer. Adds the project director: "The real joy of the program is seeing the progress that occurs, not because someone is a physician or a psychologist or a nurse, but because someone is a friend—a friend who has been there, and has not forgotten it."

In the dew of little things the heart  
finds its morning and is refreshed



Nowhere is the value of a Senior Companion more apparent than in helping a friend cope with a terminal illness. Hospice service requires unconditional caring and extraordinary sensitivity, both to the patient and to his or her family.

**“Senior Companions and hospice are an exquisite blending,”** explains a coordinator of hospice and social services. The volunteers’ sympathy and care communicate clearly, helping soften the harshness of impending death. Their presence also briefly frees family members from their around-the-clock vigils.

In another critical area of service, Senior Companions answer the distress cries of the mentally ill. For these patients, security and friendship are often the most precious gifts a volunteer can offer.

Consider George, who a year ago was a recluse, unable to leave his hospital ward. He wouldn’t talk with anyone, let alone share his thoughts and feelings. Now he and his Senior Companion ride the bus and subway and share dinner in a restaurant.

According to hospital staff, the difference is **“like night and day.”**

**“My friend here had no contacts,”** explains the volunteer, his arm reassuringly encircling George’s shoulder. **“His family is gone and he just kept withdrawing. When he began to feel that someone was really interested in him, he changed. Every time he allowed himself to reach out, I was there.”**

In the Senior Companion Program, though, change is not reserved for patients or other people in need. Volunteers also show dramatic growth and development.

**“There’s no doubt about it,”** affirms one Senior Companion. **“The program fulfills a dual purpose. It serves the interest of the client and it definitely is good for the volunteer. It doesn’t give me time to sit around and think only about the past. It does wonders for both of us.”**



For there is no friend  
like a sister. In  
calm or stormy weather



A hospice volunteer agrees. "The love that flows between my clients and me—we all need that." As another volunteer offers, "That's what makes being a Senior Companion so worthwhile. Our love is truly appreciated. And love isn't love until you give it away, don't you think?"

Indeed, the dual nature of the Senior Companion Program has captured the imagination of legislators, health care providers, administrators, and volunteers alike. "Many Senior Companions come into the program a bit skeptical," admits a social worker who assists elderly people with long-term care, congregate housing, and support services. "But once they realize how much they have to offer and how much satisfaction they can gain, they really blossom. What began as an assignment becomes a commitment."

Pursuing their dreams, not dollars, certainly is the motivation for Senior Companions. Although they are all low-income men and women, their modest tax-free stipend only partially offsets the cost of volunteering. Other program benefits are a transportation allowance, a hot meal if feasible, accident liability insurance while on duty, and an annual physical examination.

"Us old folks know a lot more about being young than you young folks do about being old."

So reads a sign in a center for the aging. "It's a good reminder for us young professionals," observes the social worker. It also captures the essence of senior helping senior. With a lifetime of experience in common, they communicate on a wavelength no one else can fully comprehend.

One Senior Companion tells of her relationship with a client who has diabetes and is becoming progressively blind. Each visit, the volunteer drives the winding road to the woman's house—a two-room cabin in the mountain foothills where she has lived all her life. "Maddie knows every bird song, every fragrance," explains the companion as she climbs the porch steps. "It would kill her to leave this place."

To make independent living possible, the volunteer has taught Maddie self-feeding techniques, introduced her to talking books, and organized the house so that everything is in a logical, easy-to-find place. "She seldom becomes discouraged," her companion says. "And, this really helps me put my problems in perspective."

In the sweetness of friendship  
let there be laughter and sharing of pleasure...



Besides the tangible activities of their work—helping with letter writing, monitoring medications, and making the dozens of daily gestures that enhance the lives of their friends—Senior Companions focus their energies on simple companionship. Again, the effort is more than rewarding.

A 78-year-old volunteer shares his appreciation for the privilege of participating in a nursing home program. "As a farm laborer, I knew so little about social services," he says. "Doing something really worthwhile now makes me feel part of this community. And my clients make me feel ten feet tall."

Adds a fellow Senior Companion in the same project: "I have learned to love and respect my clients for what they are. I never bring my own problems to the home when I visit. I come with an open heart, ready to love them and do what I can to make them happy."

Senior touching senior. It's a combination that works in each of the communities that sponsors the Senior Companion Program. One project director comments, "What impresses me most is the spontaneity of new volunteers as they take to the program. They know instinctively what needs to be done."

A 68-year-old Senior Companion acts as a liaison between the local hospital and a high-rise apartment for seniors. "It's a long road coming back from an operation," she explains. "Our job is to give these people a reason for living." That reason comes in the healing magic of the human touch.

"I encourage my clients to remember there's a big world out there," she says. "I invite them to experience new things, like painting. If they have arthritis, and can't use their hands very well, I may suggest joining our theater group. The important thing is to do *something*. Their physical and mental health depend on it."

The volunteers' own experience attests to the vitalizing power that comes with rejoicing in life. As one involved senior reflects, "There's so much new happening every day that I keep asking myself: What was I doing all that time before the Senior Companion Program?"

*The Older Americans Act opened new vistas of opportunity for senior volunteers. Establishment of 19 Senior Companion Program model projects in 1974 further broadened this volunteer concept to include seniors helping seniors. By early 1975, more than 1,000 men and women age 60 and over were enrolled in the program. Today volunteers serve through 76 ACTION-funded projects across the United States and nine projects supported solely by non-federal resources. Local nonprofit organizations and public agencies place volunteers with individuals through direct health care, social service, and federal, or state long-term care systems.*

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*Life is no 'brief candle' to me. It is a sort of splendid torch that I have got hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.*

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

