IOG: Senior Companion / Respite Aide Program

The Institute of Gerontology's Senior Companion/Respite Aide (SC/RA) program allows the District's seniors to assist their fellow senior citizens through volunteerism. The program helps to preserve the independence of residents of the District of Columbia, supporting low income and disabled older persons 55 years and older with high quality and compassionate volunteer service. SC/RA volunteers receive a stipend and benefits, which help to improve their economic conditions and maintaining a sense of self-worth.

Now heading into its 35th year and with more than 70 senior volunteers, SC/RA is facing funding cuts ahead of the next fiscal year. So why is this this particular program of so much importance? Because it fulfills a civil service amongst our growing aging population - one that after a lifetime of experience, still finds itself as the growing, forgotten majority.

SC/RA improves the lives of fellow seniors who are in need of assistance in order to maintain dignified and independent living in their homes and communities. Senior Companions serve older adults with disabilities or with terminal illnesses for 20 hours a week. Companions assist senior clients in essential ways, including offering companionship to isolated older adults, assisting with chores and adding richness to their clients' lives. Respite Aides provides in-home assistance to seniors living alone and also provides support to the care-giving families. This service helps the individual and/or family deal with the challenges of independent living in older adulthood.

Ms. Denise Richardson, 65, has been a Senior Volunteer with the Institute of Gerontology for two years. She serves as a home companion to a visually-impaired neighbor, aged 87. Some of her responsibilities include opening and separating mail, preparing meals, grocery shopping, washing and folding clothes and preparing her daily medication. Ms. Richardson's parents lived until their early nineties, so taking care of her 87 year old neighbor makes her feel almost as if she still has a parent to care for.

When asked why she applied to be a Senior Companion, she explained: "I'm doing what I feel I've been led to do. I feel like I'm doing the right thing because one day someone may have to do the same for me, and I want to feel that what I've done will allow someone to be there for me when the time comes." She continued: "Most people want to be taken care of at home, not somewhere where no one is paying attention; you tend to get better care when it's one on one."

Another volunteer, Ms. Cornelia Mack, 67, is a five year veteran of the Senior Companion program, and cares for a wheelchair bound client. Some of her duties for include taking her client on daily walks, grocery shopping and also to church. Ms. Mack also looks after two

other seniors outside of IOG's program: "Just because I volunteer through Gerontology, the volunteering does not stop. And as long as I have health and strength in my body, if there's help needed, I've got to help."

Senior volunteers and Respite Aides serve their clients for four hours a day, Mondays through Fridays and receive a stipend through UDC's Institute of Gerontology, which is grant-funded. One of the challenges of the program is the 40 percent loss of funding provided by the DC Government. As a grant-funded program, this means that the number of participants will have to be reduced; a gut-wrenching prospect to seniors who both give to and receive from the programs, and many of whom are low income residents of the District.

"This program has served D.C. in huge ways and has been very impactful on the city," explains Dr. Elgloria Harrison, special assistant to the Dean and previous interim IOG Director. "The goal of service is to have people age gracefully at home, and not have people in institutions and nursing homes."
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Next time you encounter a senior? Thank them for their service. Thank them for their life. Visit the Institute of Gerontology online for more information.