

The Fountain

About and for Valley seniors

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RSVP blankets community with unique layer of support

By Staci Lehman

Current Correspondent

"What else am I gonna do with my time? You can only make so much chicken salad," laughs Marilyn Reed, an energetic 75-year-old in describing the volunteer work she does for RSVP, a program sponsored by the YMCA of Spokane.

RSVP (the Retired and Senior Volunteers Program) is a national effort that coordinates senior citizens with opportunities to donate time in their community to help those in need. RSVP of Spokane County has been around since 1971 and works to find positions for volunteers at many area programs and cover a wide variety of needs.

"We focus on Meals on Wheels, the food banks, we have a tutoring program, there's Project Warm Up where volunteers make hats and scarves and lap robes," said RSVP Director Adam Borgman.

Reed is one of the volunteers who crochets. From her Spokane Valley home, she spends over 20 hours a week most weeks, working on warm items to be used this

winter. She crochets scarves, hand warmers, baby clothes, hats and more.

"Some weeks I do 10 (crocheted items) a week," she said.

The items are distributed through over 30 area charities and nonprofits to people who are homeless, have disabilities, are sick or going through treatments like chemotherapy, or qualify as low income.

"There's a lot of people who can't afford heat," said Reed. "We give them something to keep them warm."

Amazingly, Reed also has time to work as a protective payee coordinator for Spokane Valley Partners, the greater Valley's nonprofit community center that also helps people in need. While she loves her job, she also loves that it allows her to help more people through RSVP.

"They pay me for it!," she says. "So I can buy more yarn."

RSVP volunteers like Reed contribute anywhere from a few to over 40 hours a week to the cause. They work in schools, day care centers, health care organizations, senior community centers and at agencies that work with low-income populations and with law enforcement and community policing organizations like SCOPE (Sheriff's Community Oriented Policing Effort).

There are few requirements to participate in RSVP; the main one being that volunteers have to be at least 55 years old. Many are substantially older however.

"Our oldest volunteer right now is 102," said Borgman. "She works for Project Warm Up knitting and crocheting."

While a major benefit of being an RSVP volunteer is the feeling of well-being for making a difference, volunteers also get some perks like supplemental insurance while on duty, on-the-job training from the organizations they are placed with, mileage reimbursement for those who drive as part of their volunteer duties and new friendships.

RSVP considers a volunteer's abilities and areas of interest and finds volunteer jobs that can best utilize those abilities. Even those who are homebound or mobility-limited can help. And in turn, the program gives back to the volunteers.

"The community benefits through having seniors engaged," said Borgman. "Unless you're homebound, most of our volunteer positions have some social component to them. Even if they are homebound, they can knit warm items and someone comes to the house to bring supplies and visit and have a cup of tea with them."

Other members of the community benefit as well. Mary Carpenter is

the manager of Volunteer Services at the Kindred Hospice office in Liberty Lake. She also works with volunteers who knit, crochet or sew items for her patients and is often in need of materials.

"Whenever I need yarn or quilting materials, I call (RSVP Administrative Coordinator) Teri (Wallace)." She said.

RSVP makes Carpenter's job easy by not only gathering donations of yarn, fabric, fleece and other materials, but also delivering them to her for her volunteers to use.

Carpenter has seen first-hand the good a homemade item can do for someone in need.

"I started looking for donated materials because my grandmother was a patient of Hospice and someone made her a blanket," she said. "Not only did it provide her warmth but it became a keepsake for me. It's been seven years and I still have it on the back of my rocking chair."

It is also a way to make a real impact on people who may not have families.

"It's just a way to make them feel loved," said Carpenter.

Reed agrees, but she says she does it for herself as well.

"I jokingly say that if I quit moving they're gonna shovel dirt over me," she laughs.

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A stack of recently crocheted items made by volunteer Marilyn Reed for the RSVP program.

Photo by Staci Lehman