

Converse County Aging Services and the Wyoming Home Services Program

Wyoming is often noted for its low population density. The wide open spaces are beautiful and for a lot of us, our neighbors live miles away. This is great for getting away from the hustle and bustle of life, and maybe you feel that Wyoming is the right place for you to retire. However, you may not have thought about how these wide open spaces will affect you in your aging years. Much the same for many older adults when you plan your retirement, you haven't considered how you will remain in your health or home services. The purpose of this article is to show how one Wyoming Senior Center has taken this into consideration and applied their time, dollars, and skills to do just that.



In business for over 35 years, a senior center in both Douglas and Glenrock Wyoming make up the non-profit organization known as the Converse County Aging Services, (CCAS). These centers have been no stranger to providing beneficial services to the public. Contrary to popular belief, these senior centers, much like all the rest in Wyoming, are not just a place for the aging population to gather for card games and puzzles. These centers provide socialization, transportation, a sense of social obligation to seniors and volunteers alike, and, for Converse County, nutrition services that many would say are unmatched in the communities they serve. In addition to these services, the organization is also a provider of the Wyoming Home Services grant funded program.

Wyoming Home Services (WyHS) is a unique grant funded program administered by the State of Wyoming with one general focus: to prevent premature institutionalization for older adults and adult with disabilities. This program is designed to keep eligible participants living in their homes while receiving services that can assist them with activities of daily living. These services can prolong the need for many adults to make the move to

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assisted living facilities, or nursing facilities. CCAS provides a range of services under the WyHS program including: Care Coordination, Personal Care, Homemaking, Chore, Respite, Personal Emergency Response Systems, and Medication Setup. Of particular note, CCAS has grown their program to be the leading WyHS provider of homemaker services in the state. During the current program cycle, the two centers combined have provided over 4,300 hours of homemaker services to approximately 125 eligible participants in Converse County. That's not to mention the over 9,000 hours of combined service hours to upwards of 160 eligible participants. With this in mind, it's hard not to argue that this may be the most important service that Converse County Aging Services provides.

Ranked as the 16th of 23 counties for the lowest population density in Wyoming, Converse County Aging Services is doing its part to reach the rural population of Wyoming. Located in Southeast Wyoming, Converse County has a total population of 14,223, which equates to approximately 3 people per square mile. With the low population density in mind, one has to wonder how CCAS is able to reach so many individual on a limited grant budget. One of the reasons for their success is the fact that CCAS plans to match every state dollar they receive to provide the WyHS program with one of their own dollars from local resources each year. With that kind of buy-in, it's easy to see they believe in the program just as much as the State of Wyoming did when they passed legislation for services back in the mid-90s. This alone is a unique characteristic that CCAS takes when providing the WyHS program, but that can't be the only reason for their success. In an attempt to learn more, we interviewed Nancie Fink, the Director of CCAS and Cindy Henson, an Access Care Coordinator for the WyHS program, to get their perspective on a successful program.

When asked, Nancie felt that their success was in part due to the fact that there are very few competitors in the area. In other words, it's hard to find a for-profit or other private pay provider of in-home services in the County. While this is may be good for business, it certainly puts a large responsibility on CCAS to continue providing their services to the community. The good news is that it's pretty clear their up for the challenge. We asked Nancie what benefits she saw in the community from providing in-home services. She

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stated that she sees a large benefit when they can provide services and there's a family member involved in keeping their mother or father living at home. By providing respite services, CCAS has not only provided direct services to an eligible participant, but they have also alleviated the stress that that person's caregiver may feel, knowing that they don't have to go-it-alone. Nancie also stated that she understands why this program is so important to the community. "It's because each of the participants they provide services to, are near and dear to the people working in the program." Either through family connection, or a friend of friend that needs some assistance staying in their homes and completing daily tasks. Nancie could see that every little bit of assistance helps. Even if they only provide an hour of service to an individual in a week, it gives that participant more time to do the things they love to do. This can provide joy to stimulate individuals. It also provides relief and socialization that would otherwise not exist for a person.

To elaborate more on the benefits the Converse County, Cin-story from one of her while providing ser-earlier, older adults typi-their homes as they age, dy's encounter. She was services for an older be separated by the ef-wife had suffered from a was destined for a nurs-



ing home. The husband did as any able bodied husband would in honor of his lifelong commitment to, "in sickness and in health," care for and cherish his wife no matter the personal cost. Along with help from CCAS, the couple prolonged the wife's ability to remain at home and stay close to her husband. Unfortunately, after some time, the husband also became ill and was admitted to the hospital. He was later released to live in a nursing home, but he did so alongside his wife, as was their original wish.

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It's the small wins like the one that Cindy shared that make WyHS a great alternative to premature institutionalization. Without help from CCAS this couple may have been forced to live apart due to unforeseen illnesses. Thankfully this couple was able to find and seek out the assistance from an in-home service provider before it was too late. As Nancie and Cindy both agreed, getting eligible participants signed up to receive services is often the most difficult task they face. They see many of their senior center clients on the verge of needing services, but resistant to accepting services because they don't want to lose their independence. Nancie feels that it's about much more than losing one's independence. As Nancie stated, "if these individuals on the verge of needing services would accept some kind of assistance, maybe they'll feel more like doing things they like to do."

A true testament to the commitment that Converse County Aging Services shows their community is their dedication to helping those who may be near and dear to each member of their community. These senior centers in Converse County have done their part to provide assistance to those wanting to stay in their homes as they age, even if that means your home is far away from the hustle and bustle of small town living. Keep in mind that it's not too early to seek assistance in order to maintain your independence.

Special thanks to Nancie Fink and Cindy Henson.