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Access Points grant will help Agency on Aging deliver services closer to where people live

PRESQUE ISLE, Maine -- Efforts to expand and improve the aging network in Aroostook County are moving forward thanks to federal funding and the recent hiring of a project coordinator with strong connections to leaders across the region and beyond.

The Aroostook Agency on Aging, with overwhelming support from Maine's Congressional Delegation and regional partners, recently received \$862,000 in Congressional Directed Spending. The Access Points project is now poised to establish or strengthen local connections to services, consultation and meeting space, recreation, and enrichment.

Marking its 50th anniversary, the Agency was established in 1973 as part of the federal Older Americans Act and its ongoing mission is to assist older people in leading independent and meaningful lives in their own communities and homes.

"Getting older is a natural part of life. It's something each of us does every day. And yet it can be hard to accept, hard to talk about, and most of all, hard to plan for. We are committed to our goal to be the trusted resource for older persons and their family caregivers no matter where they live. Access points will allow us to meet residents where they are," said Joy Barresi Saucier, Executive Director.

"Through the Access Points for Aging project, our Agency staff, volunteers, and partners will focus on strengthening the aging network throughout Aroostook County. We're here to be a navigator to guide and support aging adults and family caregivers. This program aims to deliver services closer to home for those we serve," she added.

Barresi Saucier said her organization is grateful to Maine's federal delegation for understanding the importance of this project and supporting its development. She also credits the Agency's board of directors for identifying the need to expand knowledge of and access to programs and services in its ongoing strategic planning process.

One of the first objectives of Access Points for Aging was to find the best candidate to lead the initiative.

Virginia "Ginny" Joles of Mapleton, who has compiled a successful career in public relations, and served her community in various leadership roles since retiring several years ago, was hired recently as project coordinator.

Joles and Agency staff are currently meeting with leaders in Ashland, Fort Kent, and Danforth to discuss opportunities to create or enhance spaces that would become access points for older people. The network will extend to various other communities throughout the entire county. The project, she said, will broaden and deepen the Aroostook Agency on Aging's footprint in each community as the "go-to" provider of information and services for the aging population.

"These spaces or access points will be used by a variety of age-friendly stakeholders for a multitude of events or meetings while allowing the Aroostook Agency on Aging space to offer events, presentations, educational opportunities and more," Joles said.

As the Agency partners with hub communities, Joles will conduct a community needs assessment, in collaboration with municipalities and tribal units, age-friendly organizations, hospitals or health centers, and other stakeholders to determine what physical space, infrastructures, and technologies already exist and what needs to be added to elevate those spaces to become primary access points for older people. For its part, the Agency will support the access points by purchasing furnishings, equipment, and technology such as videoconferencing devices.

Ultimately, Joles added, Agency employees and volunteers will host regular office hours and programming in the space to create a consistent presence. "Providing services close to home will have a big impact on the citizens of this region. I am excited to be part of the project," she said.

Access points, and the video conferencing technologies in each, will provide opportunities for older citizens who would have previously been limited by geographic distances and/or lack of reliable and affordable transportation to receive services or important information. For example, Joles said an exercise class being taught in Caribou could be transmitted to access points throughout Aroostook, or a special speaker on the topic of respiratory health being presented in Houlton could be shared with the entire County via the access point network.

"The potential of interconnectivity is one that will continue to develop with time and as needs of the aging population evolve," Joles added.

Barresi Saucier believes successful implementation of the Access Points project not only serves the needs of older persons in Aroostook, but it will also provide an efficient model for collaboration, service, and outreach that emphasizes cooperation among a variety of stakeholders in a vast, rural geographic area.

"We have barriers of weather, transportation, and technology. Our goal is to break those barriers," Barresi Saucier said, adding, "access points will serve as a place to bring people together and that's what those we serve have told us -- that as important as the content of the program is, just as important is creating a connection with others in their home communities."

For more information on Access Points for Aging, please call the Aroostook Agency on Aging at 764-3396 or toll-free at 800-439-1789.

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CONNECTING AGING NETWORK -- Access Points for Aging Coordinator Ginny Joles, center, discusses dual-monitor teleconferencing technology with Aroostook Agency on Aging staff Tamara Cote, IT Manager, and Corinthian Dockery, Help Desk Technician.

About Aroostook Agency on Aging

The mission of the Aroostook Agency on Aging is to improve the quality of life and promote the well-being of older people in our communities. For more than 50 years, the agency has served as a resource, helping people to access information and services, while also advocating to assure the rights we all value are respected. This Agency complies with applicable Federal civil rights laws and does not discriminate on the basis of physical or mental disability, race, color, creed, age, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, ancestry, or national origin in admission to, access to, or operation of its services, programs, or activities.

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