

DurhamCares helps seniors

By Amber Younger
Staff Writer

Every Tuesday and Friday, Anne Aitchison pulls up to Meals on Wheels of Durham, loads her white hatchback Volkswagen with warm meals, a stack of copies of The Herald-Sun and an occasional can of pet food. Then she heads out on her route.

“Good morning, Ms. Moser!” calls Aitchison, clutching a bag of food and a valentine in one hand, knocking on the door with the other. “It’s Meals on Wheels!”

She lets herself in. The nonprofit agency relies on volunteers such as Aitchison to deliver warm meals to locals who are 65 and older, people with disabilities and other eligible citizens five days a week.

“We always need more volunteers,” said Gale Adland, Meals on Wheels of Durham’s executive director.

She said the agency is perfectly staffed to run its program, but raising public awareness and getting skills-based volunteers can be a challenge. DurhamCares wants to be a part of overcoming that challenge.

For nearly six years DurhamCares has served as a community mobilizer, connecting the people, businesses and churches of Durham to service and development opportunities based on the issues they’re passionate about.

Part of the organizations’ function is informing the community about why certain issues are important. It wants volunteers to see how acts of service can impact a larger issue.

January marked the start of the DurhamCares senior care campaign. Partner nonprofits A Helping Hand, Durham Center for Senior Life, Senior PharmAssist and Meals on Wheels of Durham each set goals to recruit new volunteers. In all, 70 new volunteers signed up to invest in the community.

“We’re trying to illustrate the costs of people in Durham not being mobilized and caring for our seniors,” said Elizabeth Poindexter, DurhamCares marketing coordinator.

Senior citizens are 8.8 percent of Durham’s population, according to



Margaret Moser talks about the encouragement she’s received from Meals on Wheels volunteer Anne Aitchison. (Staff photo by Amber Younger)

U.S. census data. Almost half are living alone or in isolation.

Senior citizens living in isolation spend more time in the emergency room as well as doctors’ offices and are more likely to struggle with depression. They are also very limited in their activities.

These problems will only grow, explained Adland, as the population of senior citizens in Durham will increase by approximately 40 to 50 percent in the next five to 10 years as baby boomers age.

DurhamCares believes these problems eventually affect the entire community due to the history, knowledge and life experience Durham senior citizens have to offer. Gale also remarked on the mutually beneficial relationships formed between clients and volunteers, specifically her “active senior” volunteers.

“We love doing it,” said Aitchison, who prefers the term “young seniors” instead.

“I liked the clients and I stayed. You care about them,” she said.

“That’s my buddy,” said Margaret Moser softly of Aitchison. “All of them is very nice.”

With the meals comes a sense of safety. Adland said more than 97 percent of Meals on Wheels of Durham clients reported feeling safer knowing someone would visit their home every weekday.

Meals on Wheels of Durham cares for the nutritional needs of seniors, but as Aitchison said, they are limited in their capacity to provide companionship.

“We each do individually things that impact senior citizens,” Adland said of the other senior care organizations. “We’re all trying to solve pieces of the same puzzle.”

DurhamCares focuses on nine key issues: affordable housing, disconnected youth, education, health care, homelessness, refugees, senior care, substance abuse and workforce development. Poindexter said DurhamCares has tackled issues on a quarterly rotation. The senior care campaign is set to end in April.

“It’s been phenomenal. They’ve been so gracious with their time,” Adland said.

DurhamCares hopes to create a culture in which neighbors love and serve one another, like the good Samaritan, without realizing they are volunteering. Poindexter said they hope to work with existing church programs in Northeast Central Durham, while helping others to realize the importance of community involvement.

“We essentially put ourselves out of a job when people in Durham see one another as valuable,” Poindexter said. “Everyone is valuable in our community.”