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Efforts mature to meet needs of seniors

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By **Ken Knutson** | **STAFF WRITER**

Georgian Rekash is on a mission.

The volunteer ambassador for Aging Well in greater Lyons Township is working in collaboration with the Southwest Suburban Center on Aging to inform area businesses about the needs of seniors. Ambassadors visit shops and organizations popular with older adults and leave informational packets that include a guide of transportation options for seniors and lists of contacts for local agencies.

"We're going out to places of businesses and churches that seniors frequent and bringing news of services that are available through the Center on Aging," Rekash said.

A former Internal Revenue Service agent, Rekash is not shy about tracking down a store's proprietor. Toting a wheeled suitcase full of pamphlets behind her, Rekash walked into DeVries Grocery & Market in La Grange one recent afternoon with literature for owner Dick DeVries.

DeVries said his store already offers delivery service to seniors who request it. Although the age level of his clientele has not change dramatically, he said, the Baby Boom generation is beginning to retire in larger numbers.

"This is very helpful, and we will try to help out in any way we can," he said.

Rekash said she has only been on the job a few months, but it is already paying dividends. A group in Countryside was organized earlier this year to help seniors move unwanted household items out to the curb for garbage amnesty day. A local restaurant was made aware of the project and donated lunch for all the volunteers.

That type of synergetic activity is exactly what ambassadors aim to cultivate.

"We hope that businesses would be interested in helping seniors. We want to create a partnership between everyone in the community to make it senior-friendly," Rekash said.

Similar efforts are under way in the township. In La Grange, police officer Steve Kneifel, a 10-year veteran of the department, became certified earlier this year as an elderly service officer through a state program designed to sensitize law enforcement officials to the needs of the senior population. Over the last several weeks, he has been going door-to-door throughout the village distributing material on elder abuse, identity theft and financial exploitation.

Tony Andros, a resident of Windsor Place in La Grange, received Kneifel's card during a recent visit. He said knowing an officer is assigned to elderly service gives him a greater sense of security.

For Kneifel, the effort is personal. After his grandmother's death four years ago, it was revealed a relative had been stealing money from her for years.

"Family members assume that (the inheritance) is going to be theirs when mom dies, so why not take it out now," Kneifel said, describing the prevailing attitude of those they investigate.

Kneifel said his work has also begun to bear fruit. He convinced an area bank to freeze an account of a senior citizen until it was determined which contesting family member was authorized to access it.

And when Kneifel learned an elderly woman had suffered injuries from falls at home, he appealed to the woman's relatives and even her priest to convince her to move into a nursing home. She is now on the waiting list.

"I don't want to be the bad guy. Times have changed, and we can take initiative to help people," he said. "My ears are wide open right now. Hopefully, the seniors won't be afraid to call."

