

# Area Agency on Aging *Connections*

## ACAAA program provides companions to homebound seniors

By Daniel Casciato  
For Pittsburgh Senior News

For 26 years, Carmella “Dolly” Tarasi of Aspinwall has spent much of her time doing one important thing: helping other seniors.

“Older people are forgotten nowadays,” she said. “I grew up in a time where I was raised to take care of our parents. I was always close to older people from when I was a young girl.”

In 1974, a government agency called ACTION (which later became known as the Corporation for National and Community Service) began a number of specialized programs to link senior volunteers with people in need of their services. One such program was the Senior Companion Program, designed to help frail, homebound seniors in need of assistance and support from a companion. Dolly has been a senior companion with the program since its inception.

The program is sponsored locally by the Allegheny County Department of Human Services Area Agency on Aging (ACAAA) and jointly funded by the federal government. Senior companions visit seniors in their homes to provide companionship and assist with daily activities. “The goal is simply to visit seniors to help dispel loneliness,” explained Herm Cohen, project director for ACAA’s Senior Companion Program. “It’s just a friendly, personal visit.”

“It’s such a wonderful feeling to be able to help other seniors,” said Dolly, whose devotion earned her the 2003 Retired and Senior Volunteer Program Volunteer of the Year Award and 1999 Senior Companion of the Year. “I really enjoy what I do and feel that I am making a difference in someone’s life. It’s very enjoyable and I get great satisfaction from it.”

The Senior Companion of the Year and other service awards are presented annually at a recognition luncheon hosted by the Senior Companion Program. At



“Five years of service” honorees (seated) Anna Martin, Rose Rouse for Stephanie Brown, Elizabeth Znidarzhich, Deanna Wood (standing) Florence Burkhart, Annie Calfe, Ruth Brown, Ernestine Cannady, Catalina Casco, Helen Jeffcoat and Ronald McClellan.



Herm Cohen with “10 years of service” honorees Annie Graves, Kathleen Fetchik and Pearl Smoyer. (Not shown: Clayton Heinemann.)

this year’s event, held on June 9, Phyllis Bugher was honored as Senior Companion of the Year. (See below for a complete listing of honorees.) WTAE-TV Channel 4 news anchor Mike Clark served as master of ceremonies and Allegheny County Chief Executive Dan Onorato and Senator Jay Costa, Jr. both issued proclamations.

Nationally, about 260 Senior Companion Programs serve thousands of homebound seniors and provide millions of hours

of service. In Allegheny County alone, 110 senior companions provide more than 114,000 hours of service to about 500 county residents each year. “Our senior companions will visit seniors generally once a week for about four hours,” said Herm, adding that some companions make visits more often than that. “Over time, many companions have become good friends with the seniors they visit and it soon becomes a friend visiting a friend.”

To become a senior companion,

applicants need to complete a training program through ACAA. Once training is completed, a companion will visit homebound seniors weekly to keep them company and assist with light tasks. “Some of these tasks may include accompanying them while they do their shopping, letter writing, light meal preparation or minor grooming,” he said, adding that they may also assist with leisure activities and recreational pastimes.

Ruth Ann Scott, 72, of Blawnox has been a senior companion for about eight years and enjoys it immensely. “I worked all my life and when I retired at 62, I moved into a senior citizens building, wondering what I was going to do for eight hours a day. This is how I got involved. It’s great. I feel like I did something good after I make my visit. Most of the seniors whom I visited have all been very nice people and very enjoyable to spend time with. It’s a wonderful program. You feel better about yourself and you feel like you did a good deed. Most importantly, you make a senior’s life a little easier. They enjoy that someone is visiting them once a week.”

But Ruth Ann, who visits four seniors a month, admits that the program is not for everyone. “You have to be a certain type of person to do this,” she said. “You definitely have to be in good health and of great spirits. And I also think it helps if you’re able to drive because it makes it so much easier to take your senior out to different places.” Senior companions are a great benefit to caregivers as well, added Ruth Ann. “You’re also giving caregivers a break. It’s not easy to be with a senior 24 hours a day. It’s very hard for family members. It puts a strain on the body. People don’t realize how difficult it is to care for a frail senior until you have to do it.”

For a person to receive services from a senior companion, they must first be assessed by an ACAA caseworker. Herm explained that they are then