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RESEARCH MATTERS

RIA FEATURE

CONNECTING THE DOTS

Helping older adults navigate the legal system

Navigating the legal system can be challenging at the best of times. Some older adults face additional barriers to accessing legal information they may need - perhaps they don't have family or friends they can turn to, or aren't aware of what sorts of legal documents they should have in place.

RIA researchers and staff are working with community members and legal professionals to create a program that will help fill this gap.

Trusted Help is a collaborative project that aims to train people who have regular contact with residents in retirement homes so they can help those residents navigate the legal system and maybe also provide basic assistance like arranging appointments or filling out forms.

These people could be chaplains, social workers, physicians or other types of service providers who, over time, have naturally built trusting relationships with residents – and may be the only people these residents feel comfortable going to for help.



This project is funded by The Law Foundation of Ontario as part of their Trusted Help program, developed to address the needs of vulnerable populations.

Lydia Stewart-Ferreira has been practicing law for over 17 years and spearheaded the project proposal. She says she has been interested in making sure everyone has access to justice throughout her career, and when this funding became available, she looked to the RIA.

“The RIA is a leader in the field of innovation and practical research and well positioned to understand the needs and questions of older adults. I approached Executive Director Josie d’Avernas with the idea and we went from there - putting in a grant proposal to look at ways to navigate through a complex system of legal information,” she says.

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Stewart-Ferreira sees this service as making people aware of what is already out there.

“I see all these resources out there, but there’s a disconnect between the people who need the help and the great stuff that’s already out there – let’s connect the dots,” she says.

This initial project will gauge whether or not there is a need for this type of service by surveying residents of The Village of Taunton Mills in Whitby.

Lou Watson is a resident there, an active member of her community and president of the Resident’s Council. She was approached by the team to comment on the program and review a survey that will be sent out to all residents of The Village and a group of potential trusted helpers. She thinks a Trusted Help program would be invaluable to a number of residents.

“For people who have no children, who are maybe widowed, I think it is an excellent service – a trusted person that you can go to is something that I think, if it was known and available, would be appreciated. People would benefit from it,” she says.

Over the next few months the Trusted Help team will send the survey to the broader group at the Village to find out not only what residents see as their legal needs but also whether or not potential helpers are comfortable taking on this more formal role.

If the survey shows there is a need for a Trusted Help type of service and there are people who can serve as trusted helpers, the team will apply for funding to develop and trial the program. ■

Veronique Boscart, CIHR/Schlegel Industrial Research Chair for Colleges in Seniors Care and Jane Kuepfer, Schlegel Specialist in Spirituality and Aging are co-investigators on this project with support from Josie d’Avernas, executive director at the RIA and Nathan Honsberger, a project officer at the RIA.

The Schlegel-UW Research Institute for Aging aims to enhance the quality of life and care of older adults through partnerships in research, education and practice. Innovations are developed and tested in the Schlegel Villages, and then shared to benefit older adults everywhere.



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