

Volunteer Chronicles



A Thank you Letter from Commissioner Lorraine Cortés-Vázquez

Dear Volunteers,

I am honored to have this opportunity to express my gratitude and thank each of you for your dedication and commitment to NYC Aging. Your efforts profoundly impact older New Yorkers, offering them companionship, assistance, and a sense of connection that is truly invaluable.



In this edition of our **Volunteer Newsletter**, we highlight incredible individuals who bring our mission to life. Their stories—like **Juanita**, who found a renewed sense of purpose through volunteering, or **Juan**, who is building meaningful cross-generational friendships, or **Vivian**, who is creating a true sense of community—reflect the power of service and the incredible impact volunteers like you have on our community. Read their stories and take pride in the collective impact we are making together.

Volunteering is a lifeline for many older adults in our city. These individuals experience social isolation, health challenges, and other obstacles that make daily life more difficult. Your presence and care provide essential support, joy, comfort, and community to those who need it the most.

As we continue our mission, I invite more people to join us in this meaningful work. Encourage friends, family, or colleagues get involved. Every additional helping hand allows us to reach more older adults who are waiting for a connection.

On behalf of NYC Aging, thank you for being part of this incredible community of volunteers. Your generosity and dedication inspire us all, and I am deeply grateful for the work you do.

With appreciation,
Lorraine Cortés-Vázquez

In this issue

FRIENDLY VISITOR PROGRAM

2 Retired nurse finds new passion for life: Juanita

3 Bridging the generation gap in a big way: Juan



4 Creating a community of compassion: Vivian

HEALTH INSURANCE INFORMATION COUNSELING AND ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

5 Guiding callers with health insurance questions: David

FOSTER GRANDPARENT PROGRAM

6 Never too old to learn new things: Mitchell



WELLNESS INITIATIVES PROGRAM

7 Empowering older adults to monitor their health: Nestor



ADOPT AN OLDER ADULT CENTER PROGRAM

8 Teaming up with Aetna: Rec room gets a refresh



Pictured left to right, Elena and Juanita.

Retired nurse finds new passion for life: **Juanita**

Juanita, a nurse for more than 40 years, was not looking forward to retirement. She had dedicated her life to helping others and wasn't sure what her next steps should be. "I was panicking at the thought of retiring and didn't have a plan for my future," said Juanita.

A friend from her church mentioned the **Friendly Visiting Program**, a volunteer program funded by the **NYC Department for the Aging**. The program matches volunteers with homebound older adults, providing them with in-person companionship, as well as on the phone and on video. They discuss shared interests and experiences, forming friendships in the process.

"Becoming a volunteer turned out to be a life-changing decision for me," said Juanita, who was paired with an elderly woman in her eighties in 2016. Her match lived in her neighborhood, and Juanita visited her in person on a weekly basis. "We had a marvelous connection and became like family to each other. I was with her through

good times, as well as some tough times. But we as got closer, I came to depend upon her as much as she did on me."

Providing companionship

Social isolation is common among older adults and can lead to a variety of serious health problems, including depression, cognitive decline, and heart disease.

"The program helps relieve the social isolation experienced by older adults — the volunteers provide desperately needed companionship to our clients," said Fatime Ba, the Coordinator of the Friendly Visiting Program at RAIN (Regional Aid for Interim Needs), based in the Bronx. "The volunteers also serve as eyes and ears for us — often they are the only people who interact with our clients in person and on a regular basis. They can alert us to crisis."

As the Coordinator, Ms. Ba plays a crucial role in the success of the program. She oversees the recruitment and training of volunteers

and ensures that they are matched with clients who share similar interests and experiences. One of the challenges that she faces is recruiting enough volunteers to meet the program's growing number of clients.

"There are more clients than there are volunteers," said Ms. Ba. "We currently have 120 clients, but only 83 volunteers, so we're always struggling to find new volunteers."

There are opportunities in all five boroughs, she added, and while many clients prefer in-person visits, there are others that prefer phone or video calls. Volunteers are asked to make a commitment of six months or longer. They must pass a criminal background check and reference check, as well as attend an interview and training.

Juanita loves the program so much that she is currently volunteering with three matches. "I'm even teaching one of them to speak Spanish," she said. Juanita's story is a testament to the power of volunteering and the impact it can have on the lives of both the volunteer and the people they serve. ■



Juanita enjoys volunteering so much that she is now helping three people.

Bridging the generation gap in a big way: Juan

When Juan moved to Manhattan a few years ago, he aspired to connect with diverse groups within his new community. His multicultural background, having been born in Venezuela and raised in Ohio, played a role in shaping this desire.

“For most of my life, I have volunteered in some capacity, from supporting young students in school to organizing events for older adults, and that has instilled in me an appreciation for community service,” said Juan, a young professional who left the Midwest for New York City to pursue a career in consulting.

In February 2024, Juan learned about the **Friendly Visiting Program**, and was paired with Bernie, an 88-year-old man living in a older adult apartment building on the Upper West Side.

“From our first meeting, I was struck by Bernie’s joy and positivity, despite the many hardships he has faced throughout his life,” said Juan. “This resilience and gratitude resonated deeply with me, and I saw in Bernie a reflection of the values my own grandparents had embodied.”

Their relationship quickly evolved from a volunteer assignment to a genuine friendship. As part of the program, Juan visits Bernie in person for about an hour every week, listening to his life stories that span decades and continents. “Bernie



Pictured left to right, Juan and Bernie.

offers me invaluable life lessons and a perspective that is helping me navigate my own challenges,” said Juan. “He’s one of the most interesting people I’ve ever met.”

Last September, they celebrated Bernie’s birthday, where Juan met other members of Bernie’s chosen family, a diverse group of friends and volunteers who had been touched by Bernie’s spirit.

A rewarding connection

Despite the challenges of balancing a full-time job and frequent travel, Juan has made it a priority to maintain this connection. He structures his schedule to ensure regular visits, understanding the importance of consistency for both.

“Our time together, whether in person or over the phone, has become a rewarding part of my routine,” said Juan.

Juan’s relationship with Bernie highlights the profound impact of cross-generational friendships and the importance of community

in a city like New York. “Through my involvement with the Friendly Visiting Program, I have not only found a way to give back, but I’ve also gained a mentor and a friend in Bernie, enriching my life in ways I never anticipated,” said Juan. ■



Bernie celebrated his 88th birthday surrounded by members of his chosen family.



Pictured left to right, Yolanda, Vivian and Zoila.

Creating a community of compassion: Vivian

Vivian's commitment to volunteerism is deeply rooted in her personal life. Her mother, who lives in Peru, battled cancer, and the care she received from local friends and family inspired Vivian to give back to her community in New York. "Everything I'm doing here, somebody is doing for my mother in Peru," she shared.

Vivian decided to pay it forward by becoming involved with the **Friendly Visiting Program**. "I've been volunteering for the program since June 2022," said Vivian. "At that time, I was reflecting on my own experiences after losing a dear friend during the pandemic. She fought hard for her life and her strength inspired me to give back to my community."

One of Vivian's first matches was Zoila, a 86-year-old woman from Ecuador, who she introduced to Charles, an older gentleman who lost his wife in a subway accident. "They live near each other, and I've been helping to foster friendship between them."

Vivian is also helping Yolanda, a 77-year-old woman from Colombia, who was diagnosed with cancer during

the pandemic. "Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, I was able to provide companionship through phone calls and in-person visits," said Vivian. "Programs like this are so important because there are so many people out there who don't have anybody."

Paying it forward

Vivian's impact extends beyond individual visits. She creates a sense of community among those she assists by organizing Sunday lunches and small gatherings at her home. These events provide a much-needed social outlet.

Vivian is so committed to the program that she continued to volunteer after she had an accident, even though she needed crutches.

"One of my matches had COVID and she asked if I could bring her favorite homemade soup," said Vivian. "Despite my own difficulties, I prepared the soup and delivered it to her. Thankfully, she recovered, and I believe that my compassion and soup helped her get better."

Vivian highly recommends getting involved in the Friendly Visiting Program. "It is truly a blessing for everyone," she said. "It gives us the opportunity to support older adults who need companionship. Remember, we will all grow old someday, so now is the time to give something that can benefit us in the future." ■



Vivian enjoys spending time with her matches and often hosts get-togethers in her home. Wanting to get the new year off to a great start, she held a New Year's Eve celebration for her matches (right).



Guiding callers with health insurance questions: David



David's journey into volunteering began unexpectedly in a courthouse. Thirteen years ago, while on jury duty, he met a woman who was volunteering for the **NYC Department for the Aging's Health Insurance Information Counseling and Assistance Program (HIICAP)**.

"She was planning to retire from volunteering soon and her dedication to this program sparked my curiosity," said David, prompting him to explore the possibility of becoming a HIICAP counselor himself.

HIICAP counselors assist callers with free, unbiased information about Medicare and other health services that are available to older New Yorkers, as well as their families. There's quite a learning curve involved in understanding the services, so counselors must attend training sessions and agree to participate in the program for a year.

Helping navigate health care

Despite his initial reservations about the commitment involved, David decided to give it a try. He underwent training and was assigned a HIICAP mentor who was knowledgeable and supportive. It took David about three years to feel comfortable in his role.

"Health insurance, especially Medicare, is not easy to navigate. Ongoing changes in Medicare rules require continuous training. Plus, everyone's situation is unique, and no two cases are alike," said David. "But this complexity was both a challenge and a motivator for me. I found the immediate gratification from helping individuals and the personal connections made through the calls very rewarding."

One of the David's most



"Each call, each case, is a reminder of the impact we can have through dedication and compassion" —David

memorable calls involved a man in excruciating pain due to a neglected dental issue. Medicare does not cover dental care — and the man couldn't afford a dentist. "However, with the help of a former volunteer who knew the ropes, I connected him with a dental school where graduate students could provide the necessary care," said David. "His relief and gratitude were palatable, and really underscored the impact of our work."

Language barriers add a layer of complexity to the calls. "About a third of the calls I handle are from non-English

speakers," said David. "We have a service called Language Line that provides translators for almost every language imaginable. This service has been a game-changer, especially in a diverse city like New York."

Reflecting on his journey as a HIICAP counselor, David is grateful for the opportunity to make a difference in people's lives.

"The knowledge and wisdom gained from this experience are invaluable, not just for helping others but also for me making informed decisions in my own life," he said. ■

Make a difference! Become a HIICAP counselor

Do you have a talent for simplifying complex information and a desire to help others? If so, becoming a HIICAP counselor may be the perfect opportunity for you.

HIICAP, the Health Insurance Information, Counseling and Assistance Program, is a resource provided by the NYC Department for the Aging.

"HIICAP's counselors are the heart of the program," said Fabiola Coulanges, Director of HIICAP. "These volunteers help callers with inquiries about all aspects of health insurance. Each year, we assist more than 10,000 people, either by phone or in person."

The program requires a one-year commitment, with counselors working five to six hours a week, mostly by phone or occasionally in person. The process to become a counselor includes an interview, orientation seminar, background check, training, and an exam.

Counselors receive ongoing training and mentoring. The program is always looking for new volunteers, especially during Medicare's annual Open Enrollment season, from mid-October to early December, when the phone lines get very busy. Click here to learn more about the program. ■



HIICAP's Fabiola Coulanges



Mitchell enjoys working with children as a foster grandparent.

Never too old to learn new things: Mitchell

Mitchell has been making an impact as a Foster Grandparent at the Therese Cervini Early Childhood Development Center in Queens.

For the past five years, he has been a beacon of joy and learning for preschool children aged 2-5, volunteering full time throughout the year, including summer.

"Every day is filled with fun as I work with the children — they're eager to learn," said Mitchell.

"We read stories, play games, solve puzzles, and enjoy playing outdoors in the playground when the weather permits — it's good way for them to burn off energy!"

Many of the children in his class are bi-lingual. "I read their Spanish stories to them in English, and they really enjoy that," said Mitchell.

The **Foster Grandparent Program** is an initiative that

provides support to children with special needs to improve their academic, social, and emotional development through volunteer assignments in schools and school-based settings.

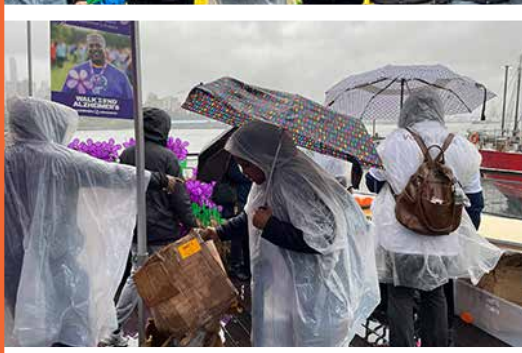
Mitchell's journey into Foster Grandparent Program began through the encouragement of his wife. With a stepdaughter of their own, Mitchell was inspired to contribute to the early development of children in their neighborhood.

Working with a class of 16 children alongside two teachers, Mitchell said he learns as much from the instructors as he does from the children.

"I always gain valuable insights from the teachers," he added. "That's why I plan to continue to volunteer as a foster grandparent for a very long time — I never want to stop learning." ■

NYC Aging staff are volunteers, too!

The NYC Department of Aging staff held a Day of Service, where they participated in the Walk to End Alzheimer's, sponsored by the Alzheimer's Association.





Nestor (right) and Erica Marin de Avila help older adults monitor their blood pressure.

Empowering older adults to monitor their health: Nestor

Nestor's journey into volunteering began after he retired. Seeking a way to stay active and give back to the community, he found his calling in the **Keep On Track (KOT)** blood pressure monitoring program.

The initiative is sponsored by the **NYC Department of the Aging** and the American Heart Association's Self-Measured Blood Pressure Monitoring (SMBP) program.

Every Wednesday and Friday, Nestor can be found at the Ridgewood Bushwick Older Adult Center in Brooklyn. "I enjoy teaching older adults how to use blood pressure monitors," said Nestor. "They really appreciate our help. Today, there was a line of 24 people waiting for me when I arrived at the center this morning."

The KOT program is a free service that helps older adults understand the risks of high blood pressure and how to monitor it. Volunteers are trained to conduct blood pressure monitoring sessions at older adult centers, explain the readings, and advise participants when to see their doctors.

For almost 11 years, Nestor has helped dozens of older adults each week, ensuring they understand how to measure their blood pressure. "Some people learn very quickly but often I need to explain the process several

times before they feel confident doing it themselves," he said.

Helping navigate health care

One of Nestor's most memorable moments was when an older woman came in with a severe headache and high blood pressure. He guided her through relaxation techniques, and after a few minutes, she felt much better and calmer. "She was grateful and thankful for my assistance," said Nestor.

Nestor's commitment extends to other Older Adult Centers when needed. His efforts have not gone unnoticed; he received an award in 2018 from the Asian Department for his outstanding volunteer work.

"We are so grateful to have Nestor because he has created a welcoming environment for older adults and has empowered them with the knowledge and tools necessary to self-measure their blood pressure," said Erica Marin de Avila, Program Director, RiseBoro Community Partnership.

"It's important that this program is available to the community to raise awareness and to encourage individuals to actively participate in their own health management," she said. ■

Staying well by keeping on track

The Ageless Wellness Unit manages 3 community-based health promotion programs. **Volunteers help make them possible.**

STAY WELL is an exercise program that enhances balance, builds muscle strength and aids in the performance of tasks associated with daily living. **Keep On Track** is a blood pressure monitoring program featuring two service models.

One is the on-site model where a team is trained in the use of digital machines and the color-coded protocol. These teams host screenings as a calendared event each month.



The other is the self-directed model wherein individuals attend a workshop to learn the proper use of both a digital blood pressure monitor and a color-coded protocol that provides guidance as to the meaning of a person's readings.

Finally, the **Big Apple Walk-A-Thon** is a walking event wherein the Older Adult Centers and NORCs compete to accumulate the most steps in their borough.

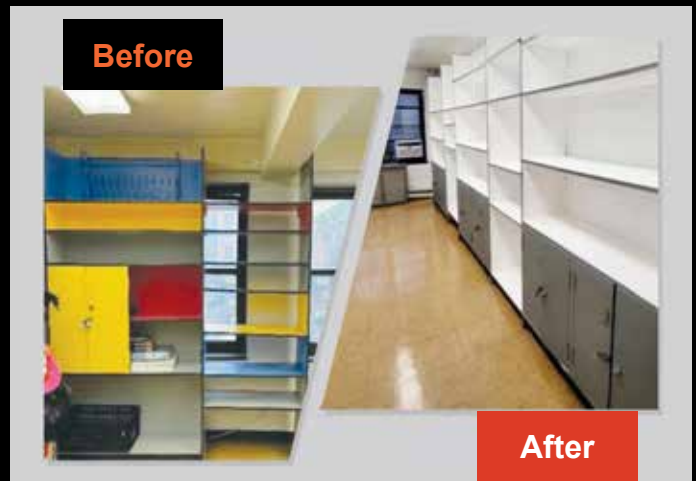
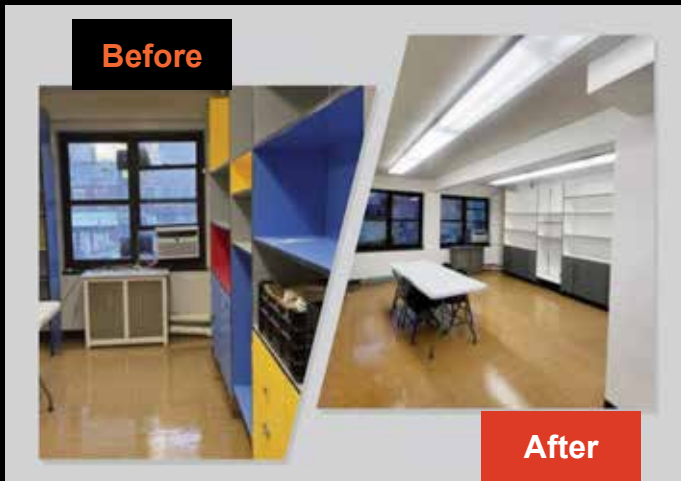
Teaming up with Aetna: Recreation room gets a refresh

The NYC Department for the Aging recently teamed up with volunteers from **Aetna Inc.** to refresh a recreation room for **Hamilton-Madison House**.

With a little bit of elbow grease, a few cans of paint, and a lot of creative ideas, the volunteers brightened up the room for the center's older adult members.

The **Adopt-an-Older Adult Center Program** brings together volunteers who want to support their local centers with beautification projects, skill-based activities and special events.

These projects are designed to create connections to help combat social isolation, improve environmental spaces, and enable older adults to enjoy their surroundings.



**Celebrating 50 years of service
to older New Yorkers**

Visit our [website](https://www.nyc.gov/aging)
(<https://www.nyc.gov/aging>)



(NewYorkCityAging)



(NYCAging)



(@NYCDEPTofAging)



(@NYCAging)

How to become involved: If you wish to make a difference in the life of an older adult, or you are an older adult who wants to give back, sign up on our [volunteer portal](https://agingvolunteers.cityofnewyork.us/user/login/).
(<https://agingvolunteers.cityofnewyork.us/user/login/>)

If you are an organization in need of volunteers for an upcoming event or program, you can let NYC Aging know through our [Volunteer Site Form](https://agingvolunteers.cityofnewyork.us/volunteer-site-request-form/).
(<https://agingvolunteers.cityofnewyork.us/volunteer-site-request-form/>)

Businesses can also have a positive impact on their communities by giving their employees an opportunity to volunteer with NYC Aging. If you would like to sign your business up, submit your information by visiting our [Corporate Volunteer Program](https://agingvolunteers.cityofnewyork.us/corporate-volunteer-program/) page.
(<https://agingvolunteers.cityofnewyork.us/corporate-volunteer-program/>)

To volunteer, individuals must:

- Be at least 18 years of age (volunteers under 18 must be accompanied by a parent/guardian)
- Meet requirements of specific volunteer opportunities (vaccination, background check, etc.)
- Show compassion for older adults

This newsletter was created in partnership with our teamNYC volunteer program.
A special thanks to Kathy Doherty at Mastercard.