

Community Conversations

For Residents Most Experienced in Life

Lee County Library System

Summary: In 2011, the Lee County Library System embarked on a project to make a difference in the lives of older adults in our community. The Community Conversations Project trains a group of volunteers to provide library programs for older adults in assisted living facilities, skilled nursing facilities and adult day care centers. The project exposes elders to stimulating ideas and thoughtful discussion by offering monthly programs at each location.

Possible activities: These are determined based on input from the specific group of elders and the activity coordinator or other facility staff. The library system wants to complement existing programs. Volunteers work in teams of two and are assigned to work with two to three facilities/programs. Activities might include the following:

- Book and short story discussions
- Readers' Theater
- Reminiscence-based activities to uncover and share memories
- Oral history activities based on the StoryCorps model
- Adult Storytelling
- Multisensory activities using music, pictures and objects to touch, smell and taste

Volunteers: The project has volunteers of all ages who have friendly, outgoing personalities, experience with facilitating group discussions (or were willing to learn), and a love of reading and desire to share that enthusiasm. The library system asks volunteers to commit at least four hours/month after the initial training. They complete the library's volunteer application process, a personal interview and a tuberculosis test.

Volunteer training: The project provides volunteers extensive training in the above types of activities as well as in understanding the aging process and working with older adults. The library system asks that each facility/program provide an orientation to their site, the elders in their program and their local policies – especially related to safety and confidentiality issues.

Elder participants: This project appeals to seniors who enjoy reading, thoughtful discussion and activities that stimulate their thinking and imagination. The library system likes to have six to 10 people at each session, especially repeat customers so that volunteers can build a relationship with them.

Orientation: The facility/program provides volunteers with an orientation to its services, facility and policies. Volunteers work closely with the activity coordinator (or similar staff member). The first visit or two are opportunities for volunteers to meet the participants and learn about their interests and experiences.

Project responsibilities: The library system and the facility/program agree on the responsibilities of each party. Generally, the library provides trained volunteers to lead activities, materials to support those activities and oversight of the project. The facility/program provides orientation for the volunteers, space for activities, and a staff member to serve as a local contact for the project. If possible, the facility provides a TB test for the volunteer, too.

Project coordinator: Kathy Mayo is the project coordinator and can be reached at 239-533-4836, 565-7988 (cell) or kmayo@leegov.com. Her office is located in the library administration building at 2345 Union St., Fort Myers FL 33901.

This project was started under provisions of the Library Services and Technology Act, from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, administered by the Florida Dept. of State, Division of Library and Information Services.