OCCOA
OTSEGO COUNTY COMMISSION ON AGING

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Expand family communications by participating in an exciting research study!

In the last issue of Prime Times, readers had the opportunity to complete a "Survey of Technology Use by Older Adults." For those who missed it in the May edition of Prime Times, the survey was also published last month in the Gaylord Herald Times and the Weekly Choice. Yet other distributions took place around Otsego County, including to the three senior centers and to various other groups and apartment complexes. The purpose of the survey was to gather basic information about technology use by older adults who live in Otsego County, so that the Otsego County Commission on Aging (OCCOA) and its partners might design a new program to enhance the quality of life of the older adults living here.

The idea for the survey and the new program first came about in October 2007 when Paul Freddolino, Professor and Coordinator of Distance Education for the School of Social Work at Michigan State University, and a colleague noticed that research had not yet been conducted to measure the effects on older adults' health when guidance in the use of technologies within a case management setting was provided. Both were aware of the negative effects of isolation and loneliness on the health of older adults. At the same time, they also knew that social support reduces loneliness and depression. Why not provide this social support of families and friends through the use of technologies such as e-mail available on computers?

Freddolino and his colleague knew that the research to validate the need for such social support would require funding and the establishment of cooperative partnerships. In checking into funding for the research, Freddolino discovered that a grant might be available through FACT (Families and Communities Together). According to their website, www.fact.msu.edu, FACT is a multidisciplinary coalition based at MSU which links the university's researchers and resources with community partners and initiatives. FACT's goal is to support the health and well-being of Michigan's children, families, and communities.

Although Otsego County had not previously received FACT funds, Freddolino knew that MSU had been successfully running programs here since 1994 with MSU Extension and later with the University Center. He contacted University Center Director Jack Thompson, who arranged a meeting that was to include Freddolino, Thompson, and OCCOA Director Dona Wishart. This initial group, with the addition of a few more members, became known as the Aging and Technologies Advisory Board. Members of this board include staff from OCCOA, the MSU School of Social Work, the University Center in Gaylord, and the MSU Extension. This past winter, the group put their heads together to come up with an outline and abstract of the project that was submitted in a grant proposal to FACT. They recently received word that grant funds for the research have been approved. "It was a good idea at the right time with the right partners!" Freddolino noted enthusiastically.

The first phase of the research, distributing and receiving completed surveys, will continue until enough have been collected. Freddolino is hoping to collect an additional 175 surveys to add to the 125 that have been collected to date. The advisory board is also searching for an Aging and Technologies Coordinator to oversee the research in Otsego County.

Freddolino shared, "After this first phase has been completed, those older adults (60 or older) who expressed an interest in continuing in the study will be contacted and given an opportunity to be placed in either a control group or an experimental group." He added, "The experimental group will consist of three types of older adults – those who have never used a computer, those who have some experience, and those who have advanced skills. Members of this group will be given access to computers (if needed) and provided with guidance in using them in accordance with their needs. Follow-up surveys and interviews will later be used to assess the impact that computer usage has on their lives."

Freddolino shared, "Through this research model, we hope to develop a program that could be administered with the help of organizations and agencies, such as OCCOA, that will help older adults establish technology-based social support networks that will help them to feel less isolated and, thereby, less prone to depression." If successful, the model could be used in other communities throughout Michigan.

From her perspective, OCCOA's Wishart noted, "Technology is certainly part of our world today. It will become ever more important for people of all ages, including older adults, to know how to access and use technology to meet their needs." She continued, "This grant-funded research project will provide some older adults in our community with an opportunity for training and support." She cautioned, "Participating in this research is both a LIMITED OPPORTUNITY and a CHOICE. We don't expect everyone to be interested. We do hope that those who are interested will find satisfaction in sharing their opinions by completing the survey, and if they are selected for the research project, participating in the second phase of the study."

Anyone who is interested in completing a survey should call OCCOA at 732-1122. The survey can also be downloaded from OCCOA's website, www.OtsegoCountyCOA.org. Just go to the Aging and Technologies page on the website and click on the link.

Those interested in applying for the Aging and Technologies Coordinator position should request an application and submit their resume on-line at occoa@occoaonline.org.

JOE LLANO, AGE 66, RECENTLY COMPLETED THE AGING AND TECHNOLOGY SURVEY. HE ENJOYS USING THE COMPUTER TO STAY IN TOUCH WITH FRIENDS AND PLAY COMPUTER GAMES.