

Akron Beacon Journal

Lonely during the pandemic? Ohio launches free daily check-in calls for seniors

By Amanda Garrett

Beacon Journal

Posted at 6:00 AM

The Ohio Department of Aging has launched a pilot program offering a friendly ear to state residents ages 60 and older who are craving a conversation or human connection during the pandemic.

The telephone chats, which began last month, are open to anyone in that age group who signs up for Staying Connected, a free, daily automated check-in service that began in May to help older people as COVID-19 spread.

Every day, between 7 a.m. and 6 p.m., people who use the program get a phone call. When they answer, they can press one button to acknowledge they're OK, another button to connect with their local Area Agency on Aging to find out about local services that provide things like food or transportation and now, a third button, to chat.

"For me, these conversations are similar to those I would have with a neighbor," said Pete Tamburro, a graphic designer who has worked for the department of aging for 32 years.

He and other department employees field calls Monday through Friday. They've been trained how to prompt conversations and have a list of at least 100 conversation starters, including hobbies, television shows and family.

But most Ohioans requesting a conversation already know what they want to talk about. For some, Tamburro said, it will be the only conversation they will have that day.

"It is the easiest part of my day and perhaps, in some ways, the most important," he said.

Tamburro said all sorts of people with all sorts of life stories want to chat.

One woman owned her own construction company in another state, retired in Ohio and had children who couldn't visit often, he said.

Another "was a very distinguished gentleman" who had recently retired and lost his social connection when the gym he visited closed because of the pandemic.

“They have wonderful stories to tell, history to revisit and are wise,” Tamburro said. “I learn from them.”

Many are living alone in their own homes or apartments. Others are in assisted living or care centers, where outside visitation has been limited to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, said Beth Gianforcaro, deputy director of communications and government outreach at the Ohio Department of Aging.

To sign up for Staying Connected, you must be an Ohio resident, have a valid phone number for a land line or mobile phone and alternative phone numbers for an emergency contact.

People who sign up have three chances daily to respond to a pre-scheduled check-in call. If they don't, the automated service calls their emergency contact.

If the emergency contact fails to respond, the program alerts local authorities to do a non-emergency wellness check at the person's home.

Gianforcaro cautions that the daily automated check-ins are no substitute for home monitoring services like LifeLine. And people over 60 who need medical help need to call their healthcare provider or 911 in an emergency, she said.

But the check-in calls, option to seek services and now the option to talk with a friendly person about everyday life, can offer comfort.

“It seems simple to have these chats, but sometimes these little things add up to the bigger, important things in life,” Tamburro said.

“Good conversations,” he said, “happen at any age.”

To sign up for the free Staying Connected program, visit www.aging.ohio.gov or call 1-833-ODA-CHAT (1-833-632-2428). If you try the service and don't like it, Gianforcaro said you can cancel at any time.