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Baker Senior Center Naples sees success with fellowships to fill hard-to-find social workers

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Baker Senior Center creates fellowship program to recruit social workers



Liz Freeman

Baker Senior Center Naples is tackling its need for social workers with recruits who know clearly what the job entails.

The first year of a new fellowship program that debuted last fall has wrapped up with two master's degree students who graduated this past spring from Florida Gulf Coast University.

The second year of the fellowship program is set to start in August.

The two students in the inaugural program have switched hats from fellows to enthusiastic full-time employees and that's mission accomplished to Jaclynn Faffer, president and chief executive officer of the private, nonprofit organization.

The senior center has signed up 1,200 new members in the eight months since moving into its spacious new center at 6200 Autumn Oaks Lane in North Naples.

That's a testament to how the center's programs are filling a critical need for services for an increasing aging population.

It also means needing licensed clinical social workers who are not easy to come by, so establishing an in-house fellowship program as a training and recruiting mechanism became the creative solution.

Roughly 37% of Collier's population of just under 400,000 residents are seniors and the region remains a retirement mecca; the senior center doesn't anticipate any slow down in growth. It's membership roll stands at 1,800 after a severe drop during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"It is hard to get social workers in this area," Faffer said. "It is very hard to get social workers who want to work with an older population."



Some people have the impression that working with seniors is depressing but that's not necessarily true and it can be quite rewarding, she said. "In some ways, it is a calling," Faffer said.

The Baker center is the only human services agency of its kind in Collier County with 40 programs that are educational, social and wellness focused. The services included dementia respite support, geriatric case management and mental health counseling by licensed professionals.

Stephanie Cakov, one of the fellows who is now employed at the senior center, said she was interested in understanding and promoting age friendly environments and late-life wellness.

“Baker Senior Center was one of the first to fill that need in the community by offering so many services and programs,” she said in an email.



How did the fellowship program come about?

Faffer, who is a licensed clinical social worker, developed the idea of establishing a fellowship program based on a similar program she did earlier in her career in New York.

She approached the Brookdale Foundation Group and its president, Stephen Schwartz for funding and secured a \$100,000 grant. Schwartz has a home in Naples and serves on the senior center’s board of directors, she said.

The Brookdale foundation, based in New Jersey, advances the fields of geriatrics and gerontology to enhance the lives of seniors.

Faffer hired someone to work with the future fellows at the center, developed course work that addresses a range of cognitive and aging issues, and hired an instructor.

The grant also covered providing \$10,000 stipends to the fellows who were working on their masters' degrees at FGCU's School of Social Work when they started their fellowships last fall.

"The fellows graduated this past May and started in their new jobs immediately," Faffer said.

The senior center is gearing up for its next two fellows from FGCU who will start the second or third week in August.

"We have two who are ready to start," Faffer said. "Word got around a little at FGCU."

Before launching the fellowship program, the center had three licensed clinical social workers, including Faffer, and now is up to eight. The tally includes the fellow hires and a few other social workers brought in since the move in the new location.

Faffer sees a need for several more hires as membership continues to grow and the need climbs for case management services and for respite services.

Data from the U.S. Department of Labor Statistics shows a 9% growth in jobs for social workers from 2021 to 2031. The median pay is \$50,390.

The state Department of Health reports roughly 12,308 licensed clinical social workers are active in Florida yet the agency doesn't project job growth in the profession.

According to the website, Socialworkguide.org, Florida's need for social workers is expected to increase faster by about 16% depending on the specialty.

“While the data does not specifically address aging and gerontology social work, given the growth of the older adult population in the U.S., it seems likely that this specialty will have strong growth,” according to the site.

The draw for the FGCU students

Cakov, one the two first fellows who finished in May, said the fellowship opened up to her how all the center programs operate, from case management to the respite care program, even the food pantry. It provided a well-rounded learning experience.

Some of her key takeaways is how large the need is in the community among seniors for support and service; another was the essential collaboration with the professionals from different backgrounds.

Through the dementia respite program, Cakov said she saw how socialization, engagement recall, and music have a positive impact on individuals.

“How engaging in discussions leads to those moments where everyone is fully engaged, sharing something that is meaningful to them, enjoying their time together and benefitting from the programs,” she said.

What also cannot be learned in a classroom is how the caregivers of loved ones with dementia are so thankful they have a place for their loved ones to come while they have a few hours of respite during the week.

The other fellow who was recently hired, who goes by Carpel as gender neutral name, said in an email that working at the senior center provided a renewed motivation and interest in working with older adults in a career path.

“It was through this internship that I was able to gain a little more insight into working with older adults, particularly those living with dementia,” Carpel said. “I could feel that there was an enhanced sense of compassion, patience and

empathy that was needed to work with this population, and I was able to put that into practice.”

Carpel was able to learn of the challenges caregivers face on a daily basis.



“The experience allowed me to contribute to their comfort as well as offer them a sense of autonomy, and perhaps in some small way that made a huge difference in their lives,” Carpel said.

As an employee at the center, Cakov said her main role now is facilitating a group for dementia respite four times a week.

“I hope to also support in other areas such as caregiver support groups and continue to enhance and grow services offered for those in the respite groups, and their loved ones,” she said.