**Health Beat**

**4.24.19**

**Volunteering is Good for Your Health**

The Arkansas Valley is no stranger to volunteerism. Countless non-profit and informal agencies solicit the time, treasures, and talents of Chaffee County residents on a regular basis for the good of the cause. According to the Envision Chaffee County Community Action Plan, volunteerism is a strength of our community with over 30,000 hours a year (16 years!) donated to the U.S. Forest Service and Colorado Parks and Wildlife alone. While many of us serve in one way or another as a volunteer in Chaffee County, what we might not know is that volunteering not only helps others, but it helps volunteer health and wellness as well. For those that do not volunteer, I hope you are inspired to consider some type of volunteering in the future to improve your overall health!

According to the Mayo Clinic Health System, volunteering helps people and changes lives. Volunteering decreases the risk of depression, especially for those 65 and older, when social interaction and supportive relationships are most needed. Volunteering also gives a sense of purpose and teaches valuable skills. There are so many needs in our own community, and volunteering is one way to contribute in a meaningful way. Volunteering also helps people stay physically and mentally active. Various volunteering activities get people moving and thinking in ways that they would not typically consider. Studies show that volunteers report feeling better when they help others. In addition, volunteering may reduce stress levels by fostering relationships and support networks that serve as protective factors when faced with life’s challenges. Data from the Longitudinal Study of Aging suggests that people who volunteer have lower mortality rates than those who do not. Additionally, those that live with chronic or serious illness find their symptoms lessen when engaging in volunteer activities that help others experiencing pain or depression. Lastly, the Mayo Clinic Health System reiterates that volunteering helps build relationships and networks that contribute to practicing social skills and getting out of our comfort zones. Overall, volunteering is good for our mental and physical health!

While there are many ways to get involved here in the Arkansas Valley, one local opportunity that pairs volunteers with seniors in our community is Ark Valley Helping Hands (AVHH).AVHH is a neighbor-to-neighbor, non-profit, volunteer-based organization right here in Chaffee County! According to the National Institute on Aging, many older adults want to “age in place” or stay in their homes as they get older. However, concerns about safety, getting around, or daily activities can cause concern. AVHH supports elders to remain in their homes so that they can continue as an integrated part of our community. Many elder members of our community are forced to leave their homes and their community because they just need a little more help than they can manage on their own to continue to live independently. This is a great loss to them and to all of us because we lose their contribution, their wisdom, and the diversity that every community needs to be self-sustaining and vibrant. AVHH volunteers work directly with senior members to give them just that… a hand to help enhance their lives and open up new possibilities for thriving rather than just surviving. In addition, AVHH offers social opportunities and assistance with tasks that have become a little out of reach. Example volunteer activities include light yard work, providing transportation to medical appointments, and assisting with grocery shopping. If you have an hour or two to spare every once in awhile and are looking for a rewarding volunteer experience, AVHH is for you! Volunteering with AVHH is flexible, as there is no set schedule. AVHH’s Coordinator, Sara Ward, works closely with volunteers so that their interests and availability match up with members’ needs. Because volunteer quality is an important program priority, volunteers are vetted, trained, and covered by insurance.

For more information, please visit the AVHH website at [http://www.avhelpinghands.org](http://www.avhelpinghands.org/?fbclid=IwAR2pDJ0Cn_A22xk0uzwUXFZT-MH_tGXc_bQb-bSrFZWYoMlsJF1HubfTGkU), call AVHH directly at (719) 530-1198, or e-mail Sara at info@avhelpinghands.org. AVHH also has a Facebook page, so please consider “liking” it today! Another way to learn more about Ark Valley Helping Hands is to attend a Service Saturday event- the next one will be on June 8th, so stay tuned for more information.

Not only do we all get to live in this beautiful valley, but we can give here, too! Volunteering can be an easy way to help out a neighbor, friend, or non-profit, while also improving our own mental and physical wellbeing.

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