

Making it REAL

Claremont organization forms a one-stop network to support seniors' goal to age in place

STORY BY **BY DON SPROUL**

CLAREMONT IS a place well known for its village, a city center where shopping, food, access to transportation and a variety of services are clustered in a friendly, welcoming environment.

The city is also home to a virtual village, now under construction with oversight from the Claremont-based nonprofit Community Senior Services, called REAL Connections. Its aim is to provide adults with a one-stop network of volunteer support and engagement, along with referrals and discounts as well as health and social opportunities.

REAL Connections, an acronym

formed from Resources for Ageless Living, is launching with \$380,000 in seed money from three organizations: Pomona Valley Hospital Medical Center, Inter Valley Health Plan and the Archstone Foundation, says Brandi Orton, member services coordinator for the project. The grants are pledged over a three-year period.

And the program is collaborative with agencies already in place, Orton explained, noting the goal of REAL Connections isn't to create new agencies, but to help seniors, especially in those times when an emergency arises creating new needs and circumstances.

It follows a blueprint inspired by Beacon Hill Village, a Boston-area project, which has spread to more than

100 cities and across international boundaries, Orton said.

REAL Connections was identified as a need for the Inland Valley in the course of a strategic planning process led and championed by Floy Biggs, CEO of Community Senior Services, Orton said.

For Biggs, the effort is a natural outgrowth of mission of Community Senior Services.

"Ninety-six percent of the population wants to age in place," she said, adding for 37 years Senior Services has been helping them do that. "This is just an extension of that, it is part of our mission," she said.

Because REAL Connections is more than just a volunteer network, but one



» Floy Biggs, CEO of Claremont-based Community Senior Services, and Brandi Orton are working together to launch REAL Connections.

PHOTO BY THOMAS R. CORDOVA

that offers other services, there are fees for membership.

Individual membership is \$570 per year; the rate is \$780 for a two-member household with an annual fee of \$180 for additional household members. Those in the first group to sign up and help launch the project will receive additional tax benefits.

Once REAL Connections is fully operational, regular membership fees may be paid monthly, \$54.50 individual and \$75 household, with a discount for paying annually.

By early May, 24 members and 22 volunteers had signed up, and Orton was managing a trial run of programs with some of the new members to shake out operating procedures.

The program is expected to be fully operational by mid-summer or when 50 members and 50 volunteers have signed up.

The types of services to be offered include local transportation, household and home maintenance, service discounts, wellness programs as well as visitor and

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phone check in, electronics advice, gardening and social opportunities.

The program also will counsel members on how get the most from their membership and will offer a web portal where they can connect for social activities, both those already in the community and ones that they initiate, Orton said.

REAL Connections has established a careful process to line up volunteers and business partners using both interviews and background checks, she added.

In addition to the founding partners whose funds are enabling the project launch, a variety of notable organizations are signed on as community partners and collaborators.

The list includes centers and departments from Pitzer, Claremont McKenna, Azusa Pacific and Chaffey

colleges as well as the University of La Verne and Western University of Health Sciences. Other agencies involved include Claremont Place Assisted Living, Casa Colina, San Antonio Community Hospital, West End Family Counseling Services and the Arthritis Foundation.

Business service partners already in place include Owl Rexall Drug, the Visiting Nurses Association, Homewatch Caregivers, the Pilgrim Place maintenance crew, Alchemy Construction, Thistle Plumbing and Appliance Parts Service.

REAL Connections will be offered initially in Claremont, La Verne, San Dimas, Pomona, Rancho Cucamonga, Alta Loma, Upland and San Antonio Heights. Other communities may be added later. More information is available at www.realconnections.org or by calling 909-621-6300.

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