

Volunteers check Clintonville businesses for age-friendliness

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Now that the effort to make Columbus a more-genial place for older residents firmly is established and operating under the auspices of the Ohio State University College of Social Work, it's time to get down to business.

Make that *businesses*.

Volunteers working on behalf of Age-Friendly Columbus, which kicked off in 2016, initially as part of the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission, will visit businesses in Clintonville's North High Street corridor Saturday, April 7, to assess how accessible and age-friendly they are.

The volunteers will include members of the Clintonville-Beechwold Community Resources Center's Village in the Ville -- an organization built around serving the needs of Clintonville-area residents 50 and older -- as well as students with

the nonprofit organization Dollars4Change at Ohio State University, said Thomas Routh, an Americorps VISTA contract employee of the CRC.

“I would say this is a really big first step,” said Katie M. White, director of Age-Friendly Columbus, which now operates out of renovated office space in Olde Towne East with the academic support of OSU’s College of Social Work.

“We heard loud and clear from our older residents that they’re interested in getting out and about,” White said. “In their own neighborhood, they’ve got a pretty good idea where they can go ... but if they want to go to a new restaurant or business, they want to know, ‘Can I even get in?’ ”

Routh said he hopes to have 30 to 35 volunteers for the inaugural assessment of businesses April 7. The group will assemble at the CRC’s North High Street headquarters to receive instructions before heading out to stores and shops in the area, he said.

The student volunteers will consider specific factors relating to accessibility for older people, Routh said. These include whether shoppers must negotiate steps, if doorways are wide enough for people who use wheelchairs, and if public restrooms are designed to allow easy use by senior citizens.

The older volunteers will look more at the experience they have while they’re inside the businesses, said Christine Happel, program director for Village in the Ville.

“There is also this idea of how one experiences a space or experiences an outing, eating out or shopping,” Happel said. “This relates more specifically to what an older adult experiences, what their lens is.

“I think it’s all part of this positive-aging campaign that Age-Friendly Columbus and the Villages are working on in this city -- moving away from this cultural habit of distancing from those who are older,” she said. “It’s an opportunity to have a say, to feel included, to feel you are welcomed equally as someone else.”

“We’re trying to get older adults at the forefront of making these community changes, of being the community leaders,” White said.

Village in the Ville members are looking forward to being part of this next phase of Age-Friendly Columbus, both Happel and Routh said.

“They’ve been invested in the age-friendly movement since day one,” Routh said.

“It’s an opportunity to strengthen the community as a whole,” Happel said. “This is a step in the direction of working with the business community.”

“Part of this is all about opportunity to improve: ‘Business X, you did really great here, but you might want to space out the tables a little more so people with mobility devices can get through,’ ” White said.

Eventually, the Age-Friendly Columbus director added, the hope is that older volunteers will take it upon themselves to assess local businesses.

“Our hope is to design a toolkit that includes a little bit of training, copies of the actual evaluation, a standardized way that we can replicate this all across the city and all across Franklin County, too,” White said. “It’s purposeful civic engagement.”

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