

Telling Missouri's Public Health Stories



Helping Assure Life Worth Living

Shannon County, Missouri

In many ways her life in Shannon County is very different now from the way it was when she was growing up here. But Nanette Massey has changed very little. She may not get around as well as she used to. She can't drive, and her heart's weak, but this lifetime caregiver still loves to help others.

Nan started working at age 10, babysitting two little boys who lived down the street. She took the first 50 cents she earned and bought herself a pair of earrings. Later she became a cook and waitress at a local restaurant. When her dad passed away, Nan moved her mother into her home and spent the next eight years as a full-time caregiver. Then one day, while Nan was between jobs, a friend asked her to come to work for the Shannon County Health Center.

At age 50, Nan became a Personal Care Giver. For two decades she provided in-home care to Shannon County residents. She helped with household tasks like cooking, vacuuming and carrying heavy laundry baskets – tasks that seemed small, but made a big impact on the people she served.

The American Society on Aging says the support social service agencies offer older people allows them to remain in long-term neighborhoods and social networks and positively impacts their health.

Shannon County Health Center administrator Kandra Counts agrees. "Our Personal Care program is vitally important to the elderly in our community," she says. "Our aides are performing everyday household tasks that the client can no longer do themselves. For most of our clients, this is the difference between living out their final years in the comfort of their own home or being placed in a nursing home."

Nan now receives the very same in-home services she used to provide. A care giver from the Health Center comes three times a week to help with household chores and personal care. A public health nurse comes once a week to check her blood pressure, listen to her heart and set up her medication for the next week. These public health professionals provide services to assure Nan can continue to live a long, healthy life in her own home. Nan says they are wonderful – so good to her – and she is thankful to have the help!

Nan turns 80 in September. After 70 years of caring for others, she is content to just sit and crochet or watch television. She's outlived most of her family and almost all her school friends. Nan doesn't have big plans for the future. When asked, she tells people, "Well, I just don't know if I'm going to be here tomorrow to do that or not." They usually respond with a strange look, but Nan is very pragmatic. "I just figure you're going to be here until your time comes, and I'm thankful I've lived this long."



In another Shannon County neighborhood, 78-year old Cora Blair embraces life. "Life is to live!" she says.

Blair married early and had children and now grandchildren. At age 45 she went to school to become a Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) and knew right away she wanted to work in geriatrics. She worked in nursing homes for the next 20 years and retired early so she could enjoy life while she was still able. She says her life has been full!

"I don't have the strength I used to have," says Cora, "but there are still a lot of things I could teach to anyone who wanted to know."

Cora makes delicious jam and says she could teach people how to can, freeze and preserve food. Sadly, she says most people think of older people as senile and helpless, stuck off in a corner somewhere, not seen or heard.

"We all want to be heard," she says. "We have something to say and want people to listen."

Cora says we have to get rid of the stigma that if we're old, we're useless. "We're functioning adults. We really are valuable. We have knowledge and want to share it. I just wish people would see that."

"Older people in our community have a wealth of information about the way things used to be," adds Counts. "How many times do they start a sentence with 'Back in my day...'? Just one example is when they talk about how rampant diseases were prior to the development of immunizations. They tell of family members, babies included, that died from the measles or the flu. It's so important to listen to their stories in order to see how far we've come, and the importance of continuing public health practices."

In her snug little living room, Cora doesn't reflect on the past, but dreams of the future. She yearns to take a long drive, shop at thrift stores, visit friends, and go down to the river and find a big tree to sit under. But without transportation, Cora's options are limited. She spends most of her days sewing baby quilts or pot holders, reading and writing.

"If I don't stay busy doing something I'll just dry up and blow away," she says.



Once a week she gets a visit from Shannon County Health Center's public health nurse Erika Orchard. Erika checks Cora's vital signs and sets up her medication for the next week. Cora says she's had help from the health department for so long, she doesn't even remember when it started.

"We don't think about them being there when we're ill, and then all of a sudden one day we're sick and in the hospital and they start taking care of us. I am glad to have them."

Counts elaborates, "Not only do we provide basic services such as immunizations, disease investigations and food inspections, we strive to fill some of the other service gaps that we see in our rural area. It's sometimes difficult for residents to travel the long distance required for medical care. So we have developed programs to help address those needs."

She describes programs such as routine lab testing and services, home health skilled nursing, physical therapy, and in-home personal care — all services that are not normally provided by local public health departments in Missouri.

"We know the need is there," explains Counts. "That's why, despite decreased governmental funding, we keep plugging away, trying to find new and innovative ways to pay for and retain the programs that are so vital to our community."



Like Counts, Cora says these days she tries not to think about what she *doesn't* have, but chooses to be thankful for what she *does* have – after all, she says, “Life is to live!”

Through their home health and in-home programs, the Shannon County Health Center assures that Cora, Nan and many other older people like them are able to live a full, rich life – a life worth living! To learn more about the Shannon County Health Center’s public health programs and services, visit shannoncountyhealth.org.

The #HealthierMO initiative seeks more stories like this one that demonstrate how partners in Missouri’s public health system are working together to transform the future of public health in order to offer every Missourian the fair opportunity to choose a healthier life. If you have a story to share, message us on Facebook @HealthierMO or email Communications Coordinator Jaci McReynolds at jmcreynolds@healthiermo.org. Learn more about the initiative and how you can get involved at HealthierMO.org or on Facebook @HealthierMO or Twitter @aHealthierMO.