

## Neighbors helping neighbors

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September 24, 2014 Jenna Polito

### **NNOH provides network for residents that is ‘just a phone call away’**

The Neighbors Network of Healdsburg (NNOH), a volunteer organization dedicated to helping local community members as they recover from medical operations or procedures, will soon reach its one-year anniversary, and is looking to broaden knowledge of its accessibility and potentially expand services.

NNOH focuses on managing daily tasks for neighbors in need, including providing rides to and from medical appointments, moving furniture as needed for recovery, grocery and drug store shopping, basic yard care, laundry and light housekeeping. Services are usually available for two weeks before and a month following a medical procedure.

The organization gave its first progress report to the Healdsburg City Council on Sept. 15, outlining its achievements during its first year in operation. In that time, the group has recruited close to 100 volunteers, streamlined its internal operations and adopted a dedicated phone number: (707) 477-2727.

Though the fledgling organization faced organization-based bumps in the road in its first year, founder and local mediator and attorney Gail Jonas said that NNOH was able to begin offering support to community members in April. “We didn’t have our parameters and protocols and guidelines together, but we did it,” she said.

Now, the organization is working to increase awareness of its accessibility, so that neighbors in need know that help is just a phone call away.

“We wanted to do a dedicated phone number,” Jonas said. “We have volunteers that don’t have computers and we have lots of people who don’t.” NNOH promises a timely response to requests for help due to a structured phone tree system that connects four coordinators to point persons overseeing lists of volunteers available to help with individual services (such as rides, grocery shopping, or housekeeping.)

“Initially, we thought we were going to do it through the computer and that proved to be a problematic route and this summer we went with the model of the dedicated phone number,” said Scott Landers, who is a NNOH Steering Committee member and point person.

NNOH Volunteer Coordinator Debbie Wallace said that she has worked to advance the organization’s internal communications during its first year. “What I’m trying to bring to the organization is some more sophisticated data management,” she said, “so far it’s been working out pretty well.”

Having reached the goal of recruiting 100 volunteers, Jonas said the organization is also exploring the possibility of expanding its operations to attract a larger pool of people who could benefit from the services that NNOH provides. “I had been told that there was quite a need for this, but we’re not getting enough calls to justify having 100 volunteers,” she said.

According to Jonas, the organization has helped around 20 neighbors as of yet, and may look toward expanding to offer rides to church, or giving housebound neighbors opportunities to enjoy a car ride in nice weather, or have its volunteers visit and read to people.

Landers also emphasized that NNOH should continue the community outreach that it has begun in its first year. “The important thing is to make the community understand that we are here and that we are willing to work with them,” she said.

Yet for the time being, Jonas said that NNOH does not intend to involve its volunteers in chronic care situations. “My promise to people when we started this was you get to do what you want to do when you want to do it and I promise you won’t be overworked,” she said.

Both Jonas and Landers spoke to the organization’s flexibility with serving the needs of the local community. “We’re focusing on meeting the needs of neighbors in and around Healdsburg ... but we will take people where they need to go,” she said. As an example, Jonas said that three or four volunteers stepped up to help a neighbor that required transportation to San Francisco for a medical procedure.

“When I’m coordinator,” she added, “If I get a request for help, I will find help. I might step out of NNOH, so I don’t mess up what we’re doing in terms of the structure we have. So I’ll move outside of that and tell people, this is not Neighbors Network – this is me trying to find you help. It’s just my commitment – not to turn anybody down unless I have to.”

Jonas was inspired to start NNOH following her experience recovering from a hip replacement in 2012. “When I learned I needed a hip replacement I asked for help because people thought I had stopped working,” she said, “and thirty people in the community through the Healdsburg Peace Project volunteered to come help me.”

With the help of friend Judy MacDonald Johnston, Jonas was able to develop a template to organize when each volunteer would help her through her recovery. “It was just this incredible feeling, and I said to myself, ‘Everybody in Healdsburg deserves this,’” she said.

“I think we’re trying to break down those walls of — if you don’t have family, tough luck,” Jonas said. “We’re creating a bigger community family and then for me it’s about creating a resilient community.”

For more information, call NNOH’s dedicated phone number at (707) 477-2727 or visit its website at [www.nnoh.org](http://www.nnoh.org)