

Being Well

Information and Support for Gainesville's Senior Community

BY COURTNEY LINDWALL

Now in its third year, Gainesville's Senior Health Fair continues to send the message of self-empowerment to Seniors and their families.

With 50 vendors providing information and diagnostic tests on-site, the free event hosted at the Alachua County Senior Recreation Center is an effort toward community-wide health.

"There are a lot of resources available to the senior community," said Susan Swirbul, chairperson of the fair's committee. "We say, 'Get out there and see what's available so you can advocate for yourself and get what you need.'"

The vendors and topics covered are broad — addressing everything from blood pressure checks to balance problems to diabetes treatment. The diagnostic tests, such as flu and pneumonia shots, will be free.

"We have the whole gambit covered," she said.

Both local hospitals, North Florida Regional Medical Center and UF Health, will be represented, along with their clinics. Specialists, such as podiatrists

and audiologists, will also attend.

As a veteran worker in the industry, Swirbul said she knows well how confusing the choices may seem for a Senior facing health problems. Swirbul works for Mederi Caretenders Home Healthcare, both treating and educating.

"Talking to Seniors as much as I do, it becomes apparent how vulnerable they really are," Swirbul said. "A lot of the time they don't have family support. They're trying to do a lot of their own healthcare. They're doing it while they're sick, and sometimes with cognitive issues. It can be very overwhelming."

"It makes me very proud. I feel blessed that I'm able to help people become empowered."

This issue inspired the "grassroots effort" in 2010 to start up a Senior health fair in town. There had not been one "in a long time," Swirbul said, and she recognized the need.

"The need we saw was education for our Senior community. A lot of information is thrown at them. It can get very

confusing," she said.

The health fair provides a lot of information as well, but in a more meaningful way. Professionals will be available

to break down complicated issues, like Medicare benefits, and answer questions they may not have time to in-office.

On the fair's committee itself, different arenas of Senior health care are all represented. Included are individuals from home health care, nursing facilities, hospices, and senior living communities.

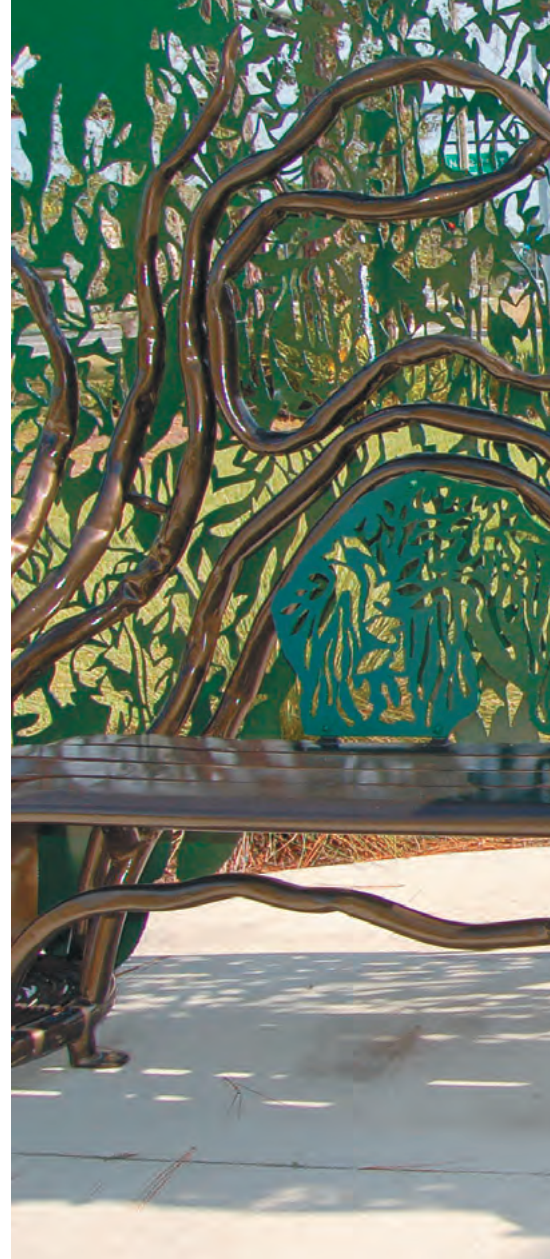




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Gainesville's health care providers have forged a stronger community, as well.

"From sitting on the committee, there have been a couple organizations that I have grown to respect and understand more than I ever did before" she said.

And so the fair continues to grow.

Last year's fair brought out more than 300 attendees, Swirbul said. This year, they expect more.

Responses from Seniors have been "overwhelmingly positive," she said.

"On more than one occasion, folks have said, 'Wow! I didn't know these services and these organizations even existed. Can you do it again? Can you have more variety?'"

The vendors also benefit, as they get a chance to talk and connect more personally with their target audiences.

For Swirbul, the cause hits close to home. She has two parents in their 70s, and both will need to be "drivers of their own health care," she said.

"It really opens my eyes that they need to become educated so they're not taken advantage of," she said. "They need to understand what's available to them."

The fair emphasizes general health education to both prevent and prepare for a possible health crisis. The first time many Seniors will address these issues is after the crisis has occurred, Swirbul said.

"Oftentimes, they don't think about

any of their options until they're in their option itself," she said. "You may have to make a rash decision or depend on others to advise you."

Although geared toward Senior health, anyone is welcome.

"We saw lots of folks with daughters, sons or paid caregivers who brought them to the fair, and they were seeking information so they could be more beneficial to their loved ones," she said.

The event takes place October 17, from 9 a.m. to 12 p.m. The Village will be showcasing its food and dining services.

"It makes me very proud," Swirbul said. "I feel blessed that I'm able to help people become empowered." ■