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Business of Aging

## Assisting with aging

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Diane Oyler is not a person who always knew what she wanted to do for a living.

And even if she was, she never would have predicted she'd end up working with vulnerable elderly, or older adults, as she prefers to call them.

But ask her now about working with seniors and she is passionate about finding ways to help older adults live longer in the types of settings and with the kind of services they really want.

As a program officer at the Health Foundation for Western and Central New York, following eight years at the Erie County Department of Senior Services, Oyler has learned to look at aging in a completely different way.

"The big epiphany for me working with older adults has been that most older adults are at a point where they're looking at aging as building momentum," she said. "They have a lot to offer, they're very smart and they want to be heard."

Oyler has spent much of her career in senior services listening, both to older adults and to their caregivers.

She has come to realize that there is a lot more control in the process, and if you start paying attention to your health at 40 or 50 years, you're more likely to be where you hope to be when you hit 70 or 80.

"Aging is not something that happens to other people; if you're living, you're aging," Oyler said. "Working with this population as closely as I have the last few years, the prospect of getting older myself is not nearly as intimidating as it once was. You really are in control of a lot."

Growing up in South Buffalo, she studied political science and philosophy at SUNY Oswego before heading south to Florida, where she completed a master's degree.



PHOTOGRAPHER: JIM COURTNEY

Diane Oyler solicits input from Dale Association volunteer Ruth Schuler during a program for the Health Foundation's Aging by Design program.

She ended up working in collections for six years before returning home to Buffalo as a young mother, ultimately earning a Ph.D. in philosophy at the University at Buffalo.

She worked for a time as a research analyst, which led to a job in the public sector working for Erie County.

There, she led neighborhood services in the Department of Senior Services, coordinating delivery of Older Americans Act services through a network of public and nonprofit agencies.

She joined the Health Foundation last year.

It was during her job with the county that she got to know the foundation, helping to implement its Step Up to Prevent Falls program.

Today she focuses on building and maintaining relationships with local senior services providers and working with grantees.

The foundation's Aging by Design program is a five-year initiative that looks at existing programs and areas of need, but uses direct feedback from older adults and family caregivers on how to make them better.

About 100 organizations are working on facilitated discussions at stakeholder labs to answer those questions.

This spring, providers will be able to apply for grant funding to help respond to those needs.

A second program addresses the importance of family caregivers in caring for the aging population. Findings of a new report on the topic will be presented this month.

"We're hoping that will be a launching point for us to work with the provider community," Oylar said.

The ultimate goal for all senior programs of the foundation is how to have the biggest impact for older adults as well as caregivers.

That means working not only with nursing homes but agencies that provide assisted living and home-care services, as well as those that offer support services for the caregivers who keep their older relatives at home including respite, nutrition and social needs.

"There's been a tremendous amount of work designed to keep seniors living in the community independently," she said. "There's a tremendously high number of people living in nursing homes who don't need to be there."

Keeping them at home requires a strong caregiver system, however – both unpaid family members who require supports of their own and home health care aides and others from the private sector who need adequate transportation and compensation to keep them in the field.

“We still need really creative solutions for building up that workforce,” Oyler said. “Many, many seniors cannot live at home with that.”

**Tracey Drury**

Reporter

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