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Community invited to help build a dementia-inclusive Southwest Michigan

Inaugural Community Partners in Healthy Aging Summit brings residents and organizations together around practical action

ST. JOSEPH — Region IV Area Agency on Aging (AAA) is asking: What would it take for a person living with dementia to remain recognized, welcomed, and connected in every part of community life?

Residents, businesses, healthcare providers, faith communities, community organizations, local leaders, and people with lived experience are invited to explore that question together at the first Community Partners in Healthy Aging Summit.

Community Partners in Healthy Aging is a new summit series designed to bring people together around the issues that shape healthy aging in Southwest Michigan. Each gathering will combine learning, lived experience, community dialogue, and practical action.

The inaugural summit, **Building Dementia-Inclusive Communities**, will be held from 9 to 11 a.m. Thursday, Oct. 1, at the Campus for Creative Aging, 2920 Lakeview Ave., St. Joseph. The free gathering will explore how every sector can help make Southwest Michigan a place where people living with dementia continue to participate, contribute, and belong.

“People with dementia are people first. They grocery shop, attend worship services, participate in community events and activities, and contribute to the places they call home,” said Amanda Drew, planning and community development manager at Region IV Area Agency on Aging. “At the summit, we will explore why dementia is a community issue, how it affects people and families in different ways, and practical steps each of us can take to support greater inclusion.”

Participants will leave with a deeper understanding of dementia as a community issue, practical ideas they can apply in their own settings, and new connections with others committed to building a more welcoming and inclusive Southwest Michigan.

A business might make it easier for a customer to identify someone who can help. A faith community could offer a dementia-friendly service. First responders might complete Dementia Friends training to better recognize and communicate with someone experiencing dementia. Residents may volunteer, share their perspectives, or help make community activities more welcoming and accessible.

“A dementia-inclusive community is not something any one organization can accomplish alone,” Drew said. “It takes all of us, including healthcare providers, community organizations, businesses, local leaders, faith communities, residents, and people with lived experience, working together to build a community where everyone can live with dignity, purpose, and connection across the lifespan.”

Community Partners in Healthy Aging summits will be held quarterly at locations across Berrien, Cass, and Van Buren counties. Each gathering will focus on a timely local issue and create opportunities for learning, connection, and action. Future topics include:

- **Supporting family caregivers:** Exploring how communities can better support people caring for older adults and people with disabilities.
- **Creating places where everyone can age:** Examining local housing barriers and opportunities for older adults and people with disabilities.
- **Building community capacity:** Exploring how the Southwest Michigan Community Care Hub can strengthen coordination and help community organizations serve people through a more connected system.

Whether you come to learn, share your perspective, make connections, or bring ideas back to your organization, your participation matters. Join the conversation and help shape how Southwest Michigan responds.

The Oct. 1 summit is free and open to the community. Register at www.AreaAgencyonAging.org. To help plan or partner on a future summit, contact Amanda Drew at 269-982-7740 or amandadrew@areaagencyonaging.org.

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About Region IV Area Agency on Aging

Region IV Area Agency on Aging is a private, nonprofit organization based in St. Joseph, Michigan, that helps older adults, people with disabilities, and caregivers live with greater

independence, dignity, and connection. The organization plans, coordinates, funds, and delivers a broad range of services across Berrien, Cass, and Van Buren counties. Region IV Area Agency on Aging is designated by the State of Michigan to administer federal Older Americans Act programs and works with community partners to strengthen the systems and supports that help people live and age well. For more information, visit www.AreaAgencyonAging.org.