

SeniorLine Ireland Lending an Ear

by Anne Dempsey, Communications Manager



Loneliness is a modern epidemic. Loneliness contributes to morbidity and can be as dangerous as smoking 20 cigarettes a day, contributing to poor health physically, mentally and emotionally. SeniorLine, Ireland's only national confidential listening service for older people, (and one of the few worldwide), combats loneliness by being available to lonely older people every day of the year. SeniorLine received over 10,000 calls in 2018, and is recognised by the Irish Department of Health as a primary health care service contributing to older people living independent lives at home for as long as possible.

SeniorLine won an Invest In Volunteers Award from Volunteer Ireland in April 2019.

How Third Age Set Up SeniorLine

The service was set up 21 years ago by Third Age, an Irish not-for-profit organisation committed to social inclusion among people of all ages. Through its members, Third Age learned anecdotally of the loneliness experienced by many older people. The organisation confirmed these informal findings through research conducted by the local health board. Many over 70s were found to have lives of secret loneliness with little family or community support.

In helping the SeniorLine start-up, the Samaritan organisation provided training for local older people as volunteer listeners on the line. Third Age sourced a service provider and a free phone number and successfully sought some initial sponsorship. However, with little money for publicity, SeniorLine was promoted mainly by public relations campaigns to radio and print media.

The service began part-time in one location, with volunteers working a three-hour rota in pairs. An initial slow response built up steadily as the service gained some recognition. After three years SeniorLine was externally evaluated, found to represent good value for money and be an effective response to a real need.

Over the years the service has grown incrementally. Today SeniorLine has 176 trained older volunteers offering a 12 hour 10am-10pm service every day of the year. This peer-to-peer aspect is a unique attraction, and many callers appreciate the opportunity to speak to another older person.

Callers phone because they are lonely, isolated, anxious, bereaved, depressed or in crisis. Some people phone regularly for company and conversation. Other callers may be suffering from elder abuse, or feeling hopeless and suicidal.

The SeniorLine listening model gives callers the time they need to share their problem, then works proactively with the caller to help them explore their options and decide what action they want to take. The power is with the caller. SeniorLine volunteers do not give advice or tell the caller what to do. However, in sharing their concerns, a caller will often see their own way forward.

Training of volunteers

SeniorLine recruits through Over-50s Expos, parish bulletins, Active Retirement Associations and other targeted media. Potential volunteers are invited to a group Introductory Morning before joining an in-house five-day initial training programme. Training includes empathetic listening, asking open-ended questions, skills development, self-care and information on older issues in Ireland. Each volunteer is mentored on to the line before going live, and personally welcomed on their first day of duty. Each is supported by a comprehensive Volunteer Manual setting out policies and procedures, and a Resource Manual containing an A-Z of other relevant services.

Volunteers receive regular newsletters combining SeniorLine news with topics of relevance to an older reader. Each volunteer is invited to a monthly Continuous Professional Development meeting which combines social interaction with an opportunity to hear an external speaker. Recent subjects have included Depression among Older People, the older LGBT Community in Ireland, Help for Children at Risk of Abuse and the Freebird Travel & Friendship Club. SeniorLine's Facebook page has weekly posts updating users on topical issues affecting older people in Ireland and abroad.

Award

Volunteers complete a Log Sheet after each call. This anonymised data is used by the Third Age/SeniorLine service to advocate for older people in Ireland to government, local authorities, other stakeholders, and to make the business case with potential funders.

SeniorLine staff includes a Programme Manager, Training Facilitator and two administrators. SeniorLine believes its success is due in part to its ethos of listening to and valuing its volunteers. In April 2019 SeniorLine will receive an Invest In Volunteers Award from Volunteer Ireland, one of only 10 Irish charities to be so honoured. www.thirdageireland.ie/seniorline