

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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North Carolina Baptist Aging Ministry
Carol Layton, Director of Communications
336.474.1221
clayton@bchfamily.org



Hope Line Volunteers – In Their Own Words

Connecting with lonely seniors during the pandemic

Carol Layton, NCBAM Director of Communications

North Carolina Baptists are making a difference in the lives of people every day. Many deliver food to the doorsteps of isolated seniors, others construct wheelchair ramps, and some are changing lives from the comfort of their own homes. More than 40 volunteers, along with team members from North Carolina Baptist Aging Ministry (NCBAM) are currently manning **NCBAM's Hope Line**. The friendly call service, which includes both inbound and outbound calls, is available daily, 9:00am-9:00pm. **866.578.4673 (866.578.HOPE)**

In March, when older adults were encouraged to self-isolate to protect themselves from the novel coronavirus, the Hope Line experienced a 923% increase in calls from the previous month. To meet the increased demand, two lines and weekend service were quickly added.

In mostly their own words, what follows are the experiences of mission-minded Hope Line volunteers as they share what it's like to connect with older adults living in the throes of social isolation and loneliness during the covid-19 pandemic.

Gereline commits four hours each week to the Hope Line. "Answering Hope Line calls is a blessing. I'll soon be 78 years old so I understand what some callers are going through. Children and grandchildren are busy with their own lives, and callers need to be able to pick up the phone and know they can talk to someone."

"I prayed for a long time, 'Lord, what can I do that will further your Kingdom?' Then, NCBAM showed up and here I am! I've lived for years without shedding a tear, but God has softened my heart to weep for the joy of being able to serve on the Hope Line. I always receive more from the person calling."

Al and his wife Rose serve on the Hope Line one afternoon each week. At one o'clock, they grab their phones, make themselves comfortable in a room together, and wait for the calls to start. Al and Rose's strategy grew out of the specialized training they received in "mindful awareness" and "other-focused listening" which encourages minimizing distractions so that callers receive the best possible experience.

Rose sees God's hand at work in the calls that come to each of them. "I've never gotten a male caller, but Al has several times and he's able to connect with them in a way that maybe I could not." Rose says that her callers are dealing with a wide variety of situations. "Some have been recovering from surgery, some are widows, one had grown up as a foster child and has no family to talk to. Some looked forward to church because it was their only time out of the house, and now they are missing that. But they all have one thing in common: they just need someone to talk to."

One of Rose's callers told her, "When I call people I know, they seem so busy with their lives, I feel like I'm bothering them. But I feel like you are listening to me." Rose says the Hope Line training helped prepare her for this: "We were trained to give people time to process what they want to say. We learned we don't have to fill every silence, but to give them space to think and then to talk."

Al says the Hope Line is something very positive in his life. "Rose and I like serving together. We are blessed with a great family and with each other, but I've talked with widows and widowers who don't have anyone. I've learned that sometimes, just having someone to talk to makes *all* the difference."

Cheryl began taking Hope Line calls during the pandemic and it has been an eye-opener for her. "I never realized the things that so many older adults are going through. So many callers don't have any family close, or they are estranged from their children, or some don't even know where their children are."

Cheryl and a friend walk together three times each week. "One day as we were walking, it occurred to me that within a ten-mile radius of our church, there were probably many people dealing with the same issues I hear from Hope Line callers all across the state. It just breaks my heart to hear how lonesome they are. Some don't have *anybody*."

Cheryl is glad the Hope Line was started. "It's worth all the hard work NCBAM put into it, and I'm so glad I volunteered. It blesses me to be the person someone can talk to. Some are struggling with issues of faith and have asked deep questions about being a Christian. I like it that NCBAM supplied me with a resource list, Scripture verses to share, and the ***One Hope*** devotional that I can offer to callers. It touches my heart when they ask me to pray for them, and I often sense they feel better after we talk. Everyone has just been so appreciative of having someone to talk to."

Jackie sees the Hope Line as a much-needed service for North Carolina's aging. "The pandemic has heightened loneliness for lots of people. Many tell me their only outing was to church or the grocery store, and now they can't do that. But many callers have been living this way for years. I know there are several in our church who don't see anyone all week and most of my callers are in the same situation. Their families have moved away or are estranged."

Jackie appreciates the training and support she has received from NCBAM. "Our last volunteer handout had good information on how to end a call. That had been my biggest dilemma because some people just don't want to hang up. It felt like no matter how long we talked, it was never enough. The handout was helpful in dealing with this correctly."

Like all Hope Line volunteers, Jackie says taking calls is a blessing to her. "I know how I would be if I didn't see anyone a week at a time. I can tell that a live voice is a blessing to callers."

Kay says that answering calls to the Hope Line is a ministry for her. "I have been able to pray with callers and they really appreciated it. Some of my calls have been lengthy but the one that broke my heart was a short one where a caller said, 'I just wanted to hear the sound of someone's voice' and then she hung up." Kay's ministry-minded heart is evident as her voice softens, remembering, "I was glad I was there for what she needed in that particular moment."

To learn how your church can be involved with NCBAM's Hope Line, call 877.506.2226.