

Copper Lake/Lincoln Hills Foster Grandparent Program

AmeriCorps Seniors Program of the Year

The Copper Lake / Lincoln Hills Foster Grandparent Program is one of the longest operating AmeriCorps Seniors programs in the state. As they first started serving youth at the Copper Lake School in 1973. Unlike the other Foster Grandparent Programs in the state that operate at typical K-12 schools, what makes their program unique is that their volunteers serve at the two schools within the only Type 1 Correctional Facility for youth in the State of Wisconsin. Their Foster Grandparents volunteer in the living units, school classrooms, and/or their reading buddy program, striving to bring a spirit of love and care to the young people within these facilities.

The volunteers take on numerous roles as part of their service, tutoring the youth in multiple subjects in the classroom and acting as a mentor that can provide them with needed attention. They engage the youth in activities ranging from playing cards and other games, baking treats together to share, doing crafts and outdoor planting, to simply talking and serving as a willing ear that will not judge or give up on them. The Foster Grandparents have an amazing ability to communicate with the youth and form connections in ways that facility staff often cannot. The youth know that they are volunteers who do not have to be there and yet commit to coming there solely because of their caring spirit. They also provide an additional sense of consistency for youth through their long-term commitment to service as volunteers at facilities that have a high turnover rate for employees.

To continue providing this caring presence for the youth during the COVID-19 pandemic, the program worked with the Department of Corrections. After initial efforts to transition to virtual mentoring, the Foster Grandparents were fortunately able to return to serving in-person following the availability of the COVID-19 vaccines. With concerns for their safety due to the environment within the facility being seen as more hostile than before the pandemic, the volunteers met with their program supervisor to discuss changes to the institution's climate to see if they still wanted to return. Without hesitation, the Foster Grandparents expressed their willingness to return and they were confident everything would be fine. It took time for the volunteers to build up a rapport for the youth after returning, as roughly 95% of the youth had not been at the facility prior to the pandemic and did not know what to think of these incoming Foster Grandparents. By the end of the second week, the youth began to open up to the volunteers and the environment began shifting around them. When the Foster Grandparents held a day in the gym with the youth to help the school on a teacher in-service day, facility staff reported it being a whole new world. While engaging with the volunteers in games and craft activities, the day showcased an overall atmosphere of respect without arguments or prior concerns. The youth took the initiative to pick up beanbags for the grandmas they were playing cornhole with so they would not have to bend over. With the growing impact of their service becoming apparent following their return, the superintendent and the educational director for the schools have even reached out to see if the Foster Grandparents can be there for more days and later hours to expand the difference they are making.

Across the 48 years that the Copper Lake / Lincoln Hills Foster Grandparent Program has been in operation, they have continued to show up and made a difference in the lives of youth within a challenging environment. They have had an invaluable impact for the young people within these facilities, offering them far more than just educational assistance, but serving as caring mentors that demonstrate a willingness to invest their time and heartfelt attention to provide connections for these youth.



Grandma Robin



Grandma Joan



Grandma Nona



Grandma Jessie



Grandma Jeannith



Grandma Marg



Grandpa Ed



Grandma Audrey



Grandma Pat



Grandpa Jerry



Grandpa Phil



Grandma Joan