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For my service learning project, I was granted the opportunity to volunteer at the Athens Community Council on Aging under the supervision of the Care Coordinator, Jenna Moon. Athens Community Council on Aging, or ACCA for short, is a private, non-profit organization that serves the aging community of Athens, Clarke County, and 27 other counties in Georgia. They have 14 aging service programs that help the aging population with various issues like finding housing, understanding their Medicare benefits, helping them understand what opportunities are out there for the aging population, and so much more.

ACCA is well-known for its Meals on Wheels program, which provides not only healthy meals but also enjoyable visits, safety checks, home repairs, and ongoing community involvement for the aging population they serve. ACCA's Meals on Wheels program is crucial, but it is not the only thing the organization has to provide to the community. They provide a variety of health and wellness services, including Grandparents Raising Grandchildren, Long-term Care Ombudsman, transportation, Adult Day Health Care services, and many other programs that benefit the aging population.

ACCA's mission is to "promote a lifetime of wellness through engagement, advocacy, education, and support." *Athens Community Council on Aging* (2023). I believe they execute this mission with grace and determination. Volunteering on the paperwork side of things, I was able to see firsthand all of the hard work the staff put in to ensure that each person was advocated for, educated on their rights, had their needs supported, and that the staff remained engaged in the issues at hand. I saw that the staff truly cares about each individual they serve.

When I started volunteering, it was in the latter part of January. I volunteered every Tuesday and Thursday from 3:00 pm - 4:30 pm when the ACCA office closed. On my very first day, I was taken on a tour of the ACCA office, where I got to meet the staff that was head of

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren, the Meals on Wheels coordinators, the person over Medicare, and the volunteer coordinators. Jenne Moon, the Care Coordinator, is a new addition to the ACCA team and told me that she has never worked under this title before, so it was a new experience for her.

Some days when I came in, I would be searching for houses on Zillow and Craigslist for families that needed a place to stay. I would look for 4-bedroom apartments under \$2,000 or 2 bedrooms under \$1,200. On other days, I would look for and contact carpenters and contractors to see if they offered free consultations. I would ask if they did free consultations because ACCA uses housing repair vouchers to help aid the aging population with housing repairs or ramp building. Because we do repairs on vouchers, Jenne didn't want to waste any of the voucher money on the consultation when she was still deciding between companies to work with.

When no one was in need of a housing repair or a place to stay, I would listen in on the Zoom webinars Jenna frequently attended. The first webinar I listened to was about Medicare. It was an hour-long Zoom meeting, but it was very informative, and I learned a lot about Medicare and the benefits that the aging population can receive. In another Zoom meeting I listened in on, the speaker spoke about housing grants and housing vouchers, which are the topics Jenna mainly focuses on at ACCA.

When I reflect on my brief time at ACCA, I recall all of the valuable knowledge I gained. The first and perhaps most essential thing I learned is that people who work for nonprofit organizations make money! I know it was naive of me to assume differently, but I honestly believed that individuals conducted non-profit work as a passion rather than a profession. After working with ACCA, I discovered that it is both. I was always scared that my passion wouldn't

be enough to support a sustainable lifestyle, but Jenna and the rest of the staff showed me that that narrative was wrong.

The second most significant lesson I learned was the importance of knowledge. Jenna dealt with a lot of housing cases and briefly with Medicare cases; yet, I discovered that some people, even when given the information, didn't know how to use it because no one had ever explained it to them. Learning this encouraged me to research Medicare and Medicaid, and these two issues became the focus of my Introduction to Health Policy class presentation because I wanted to ensure that I was well-versed in the subject so that I could educate others, such as my mother and father.

The third important thing I learned is that discrimination is still alive and present in today's society. Learning about the United States Housing and Urban Development, or "HUD," housing opened my eyes to this fact. Learning that people are being discriminated against from receiving housing vouchers was mind-boggling to me, especially when I learned that the vouchers are guaranteed money from the government, and landlords still wouldn't accept the vouchers because of their presumed assumptions. Not only was it heartbreaking for me to hear it, but it also angered me and made me want to find a way to fix this issue.

The last thing that I learned from volunteering at ACCA is that a supportive staff is essential to having peace of mind at the workplace, especially when the work you are doing can be tiresome. While volunteering at ACCA, we were lucky enough to receive a voucher for an unhoused individual who was staying at the Adult Day Health Care Center. The staff banded together to buy housing essentials for this individual and were planning to help him move in. When things didn't happen the way they were supposed to and the individual wasn't able to

move in on the day he was promised, Jenna received tremendous support from her coworkers to help her investigate the issue.

Jenna even became HUD housing certified during my time as a volunteer, and her coworkers and management didn't just congratulate her; they put her picture and story in the staff newsletter and threw her a celebratory party. Although I wasn't there, hearing her talk about it brought joy to my heart and helped me realize the environment in which I would like to work in the future. A healthy work environment is a significant component of public health.

Although I am on my journey towards becoming a Pathology Assistant, everything I learned while volunteering will benefit me in my future professional job. I will always advocate for people and stay current and aware of the key problems involving Medicare and Medicaid while I continue to pursue my minor in health policy, since I believe a change is necessary. I still want to learn more about housing policies and how improvements can be made to help eliminate discrimination against low-income and unhoused individuals.

### **Work Cited**

1. *About Us—Athens Community Council on Aging*. Athens Community Council on Aging -. (2023, November 30). <https://www.accaging.org/about-us/>