Hadley Presents

Well Connected Call-In Community for Older Adults

Presented by Ricky Enger

Ricky Enger: Welcome to Hadley Presents. I'm your host, Ricky Enger, inviting you to sit back, relax, and enjoy a conversation with the experts. In this episode, we learn about the Well Connected program, and our guest is director of the program, Amber Carroll. Welcome, Amber. Thanks so much for joining.

Amber Carroll: Hi, Ricky. Thanks so much for having me.

Ricky Enger: Absolutely. It is so important to talk about anything that keeps us reaching out to each other and establishing those social connections. So, I'm really excited to learn all about what it is that you do and what the program is. So why don't we just start with that then. Tell us a bit about yourself and about Well Connected.

Amber Carroll: Well, my name is Amber Carroll. I've been the director of Well Connected for the last five plus years. And what a joy the last five plus years have been with this program. Well Connected is a program that virtually connects older adults. It really provides a virtual community for older adults to learn, to laugh, to share, and really most importantly, to connect with each other. This week alone, Well Connected, and I should also throw in Well Connected Español, are hosting 138 groups for over 3000 people joining from across the country, to do all those things around a bevy of different topics. So, people really convene around a topic that's of interest to them and have the opportunity to meet with like-minded people and connect and engage with each other.

Ricky Enger: That's really awesome, especially knowing that there are ways to connect with people who have similar interests. Some groups, we're connecting because we're in the same geographic area, or we're connecting because perhaps we're in the same age group. But having things that are even a bit more specific than that, I think makes for very interesting connections.

You mentioned older adults, and so that kind of brings to mind, maybe there are some specifics involved, as far as who's eligible. So, can you talk a bit about that?

Amber Carroll: Yeah. Older adults, we consider in the Well Connected programs to be people 60 or older. We do make exceptions to that if it's a good fit, but generally our programs average age of participants is 75. So that's really the only prerequisite. Aside from that, this program is available free of charge to any older adult living anywhere in the United States. And I mentioned Well Connected Español. So, that is the same model of program entirely in Spanish. So, these programs are open to any older adults, 60 or older, who speaks English or Spanish.

Ricky Enger: So, our audience has vision loss as one aspect of daily life. One of the things that people with vision loss can really struggle with is, how can I be involved in these groups? It's difficult to get transportation to places. It might be difficult to even find out what's available, or it's difficult to operate the technology necessary to be a part of some groups, if they're all on Zoom, as they have been during the pandemic. So how does Well Connected kind of address that whole issue of getting people in touch with each other easily and kind of seamlessly?

Amber Carroll: This is really the core. Certainly, during COVID, we've seen every program globally jump on Zoom to bring programs virtually. Well Connected has been around since 2004, so we didn't have to be particularly nimble when COVID hit, because we've really become experts in providing accessible virtual communities for folks.

So, what you're really talking about is accessibility. And the thing I'd say is when we started in 2004, we were a program of six people. Six people were told to call a toll-free number at a designated time. And they all convened and talked for a half hour and laughed and shared. And that was really the origin of the program.

So, we now have over 3000 participants across the country, but what's been really interesting is there's a culture in the program that started with our founder, Terry Englehart, who created this culture of being a program by and for the people. So, what happened was those first six people told their friends about it. At some point early on, one of the original people had an idea to host her own group. And Terry said, "Great, bring it." So that started the culture of really leveraging the participants in the program to also give back and provide programming for it.

Then we had our first blind participant join. And that blind participant suggested that we do our materials in an audio file so that they could plug it into their talking book reader, and we've been doing that ever since. So that's available in both the English and the Spanish program, that we have an audio file of all of our materials every session. Our first braille reader joined a few years later. And so now we transcribe our materials into braille.

At base, we're a virtual program. Everything is accessible by phone. And as more people have started using more technology, we still consider it really important to make sure that everything is accessible by phone. And that's any kind of phone. You don't need to have a fancy smartphone. You don't need to download an app. You can quite honestly call from that avocado green phone, hanging on your kitchen wall and access any group. And as we move forward, we're also making groups accessible online.

But what you're talking about in regards to accessibility, is so critical to what we do. We had a participant a couple of years ago who ended up losing her eyesight due to surgery related to a tumor. So she was, I believe, 60 years old at the time. And she was new to not having vision and was really trying to utilize resources. And she said her poor husband had to drive her to all these different support groups across town here and there and everywhere else. And as she was adjusting to it, then she learned about Well Connected and realized, "Oh, or I can join some support groups from the comfort of home and join on the phone."

And that in and of itself, that things are phone accessible, makes it so much easier for low vision and blind participants to engage in these programs. And in fact, about 30% of our members are low vision and blind. So, there's a lot of programming that's very specific to that population, as well.

Ricky Enger: That's great to know. And again, yeah, it is so important to meet people where they are, because how disheartening would it be to say, "Hey, there's this really great program and it's perfect for you, except you have to learn how to use a smartphone first." It just doesn't work for some people. So, it's great to know that this is available. And I think you have catalogs of your materials that are available to people so that they can see what groups they want to join. Is that right?

Amber Carroll: We do. We do our sessions on a trimester basis. So, every four months a new catalog comes out. A lot of the groups repeat from session to session, but every session there's a lot of new groups as well. So, we put those in the mail for folks. As I talk about accessibility, I think we've made great strides, but we are still a billion miles away. So, our catalog online, we have it in a PDF form, which we have recently been told that is not screen reader friendly. So, we're working on solutions to make everything that we do screen reader friendly. And I have to thank Hadley, who has been really helpful with that process for us.

It's interesting, as every program has really jumped on Zoom, because especially with the added security features that are great that Zoom has put into place, but you might have to enter like 30 digits into your phone to join a group by phone. And that's a challenge for everybody.

Ricky Enger: I've been dialing a phone for an unspecified number of years without any vision. And I still find it just nerve wracking to try and enter everything on time before Zoom times out. So yeah, that's always fun.

We've talked about just connecting with people in there, all these different groups that are available through Well Connected, which is amazing. I'm thinking though, of the person who is maybe really an introvert in groups or overwhelming. Or somebody who just wants to connect with a single person and that's all they want. Or maybe even somebody who's, they're losing their vision or they're adjusting to a major change in their life. So, are there ways that people can connect one-on-one? And then further to that, are there ways that people can connect to groups that are specifically for, I guess, supporting the major change going on, like vision loss?

Amber Carroll: Absolutely. And yes, and yes, to both of those things. Well Connected has a sister program called Social Call and Social Call started as a very traditional friendly visiting program, where a volunteer would be matched with an older adult and go into their homes.

And about two years ago, so also pre-COVID, we decided to launch Social Call as a virtual program as well. And this really happened from listening to the voices of Well Connected participants. Because we were hearing that somebody might refer somebody to Well Connected and they'd call and they'd be like, "Oh, well the group thing, I don't know if I'm into the group thing. What I really want is a person." We spent years trying to refer people to friendly visiting programs in their community, but as you're, I'm sure, aware they just don't exist in a lot of communities.

And the other thing is, those programs tend to be really challenging, because so much about matching a volunteer with a participant in community, is dependent on transportation and geography. If you can really match people based on important stuff, like common interests, shared values and personality, then you can really just do amazing things with the matching process. Our director of Social Call calls it prescriptive matching. And if you remove geography from the equation, you can really do that.

We had a woman call us who was exactly the person you're talking about. She wasn't really interested in that group setting; she really wanted a person. And she had just been diagnosed with macular degeneration and was losing her vision. And she said, "I really would love to be matched with somebody who had gone through that experience."

Now this is another piece with traditional friendly visiting programs, they tend to be really wonderfully intergenerational. But you'd be pretty hard pressed to find a match of a 24-year-old who had gone through the experience of macular degeneration. So, what we did, we were able to leverage the Well Connected community. So, we called Marie, who's been a long-time participant and facilitator on Well Connected. And we said, "Hey, Marie, might you be interested in being matched with this woman?" Now, the really funny thing, Ricky, is that these two women ended up living about a mile from each other.

Ricky Enger: Oh, that's funny.

Amber Carroll: They're still matched. It's been two years and they’ve never met in person.

Ricky Enger: Oh, that's even funnier.

Amber Carroll: They talk on the phone every single week and a beautiful friendship has evolved.

Ricky Enger: That's amazing. And they never really did need to go to one another's houses or any of that. Just that phone connection was enough, and it didn't matter that they lived so close together.

Amber Carroll: Absolutely. But we see that all the time where we might have somebody in California matched with somebody in Florida or something like that.

Ricky Enger: And how about for the people that do want more of a group setting, but they're looking for that same thing? They want to connect with somebody, for example, "Who has gone through vision loss that I'm going through right now?" Are there those kinds of adjustment support groups available?

Amber Carroll: There are, and all of our programming, it's just amazing. And all of it is born by volunteers. So about 80% of that is born from our participant population. And then the other 20% is really bringing in experts. So, Hadley has done groups to talk about vision rehabilitation therapy and talked about all the cool stuff you guys do at Hadley. We bring in other organizations to talk about things.

We have a rich kind of cadre of support groups and then one time groups. So, since about 30% of our folks do experience vision loss, most of those, it's age-related vision loss. We have a lot of groups that really accommodate that, because all of our groups are groups that people are asking for. And it's either people wanting to lead them or just requesting topics. So, we're always trying to provide what the community wants. I could think something is a really fun group, but if nobody but me is interested in it, it's not going to go anywhere. So, we get a lot of requests.

And just this session, I was sort of going through, as far as regular weekly support groups, we have a support discussion group for the blind. We have another regular group called Speaking Up Without Visual Cues. We have a low vision support group with the tagline: The Eyes Have It. We have another group called Living with Vision Loss. And then we do a lot of kind of one-time health and wellness presentations, technology presentations.

We partner with the American Foundation for the Blind. They do about two sessions a year with the editor from Access World Senior Issue, to talk about kind of all the new technology and cool gadgets and gizmos that people can use around vision loss. We're also doing a health and wellness presentation called Vision Loss: Rehabilitation, Employment and Social Programs, which is done in tandem with the OIB-TAC Group and Envision Services for the Blind and Visually Impaired.

So, we also bring in experts to talk about different things related to vision loss. And obviously not only vision loss, but all kinds of other topics of interest to our community.

Ricky Enger: Have you noticed during the pandemic; we're experiencing the social isolation. People are feeling lonelier than they ever have before, because there's just not that in-person connection that we're all accustomed to. What changes have you noticed during the pandemic about how things are happening at Well Connected? Whether it's a change in group dynamics, or just something that people are asking for that they didn't before, or maybe even just an increase in the number of people participating?

Amber Carroll: All of that. I mean, one of the things that's really interesting is, since we've been doing this for a long time, we didn't have to shift like so many other organizations, to shift to a virtual model. So, we knew what we were doing. One of the things we didn't expect was how much people would be reaching out to us for support to help their programs launch.

But I'd say the other thing, pre-COVID, explaining what we did to organizations who only provided live in-person training, was always hard. It was hard to get people to understand that a community can actually exist, that relationships can develop and be fostered and nurtured and continue in a virtual setting. Now, everyone seems to understand that, which is really nice. But what we did notice was a huge uptick in participation.

So last year we were averaging 48 new Well Connected and Well Connected Español registrations on a monthly basis. Throughout this fiscal year, we've averaged 155 new registrations every month. So how that has kind of panned out is, one, yeah, we have just a lot more people joining our programs.

Now, the important thing about Well Connected that I think really differentiates us from every other organization out there providing virtual programming, is at base, we're about engagement. I think our content rivals that of Osher Lifelong Learning and the Teaching Company and organizations like that. But really the curriculum, the actual topic of the groups is really just the conduit for people to intervene around an interest. The real crux of it is relationship building.

Through COVID, we just keep hearing people saying, "Oh, give older adults a tablet. Teach them how to use it, and then the problem’s solved." Well, it's not solved. We're always trying to work with organizations like that to say, "Great, get a tablet in somebody's hand, provide that training, but what's the destination?" And we would love to be that destination because it's a beautiful destination.

But with that, we don't want 100 people on a group because 100 people makes it more challenging to engage. So, the other thing we've had to pivot to do is create more programming. So, we might have three groups all going on at the same time. So, people might need to pick and choose to keep groups smaller. Our volunteerism, COVID, I think has brought out the best in some people and the worst in other people. The bringing out the best in people just provided this huge influx of people wanting to volunteer.

Ricky Enger: And how does that work? So, how do people become involved? And is it kind of the same restrictions as for those who can be members of the groups, or is it kind of a free for all ages sort of thing? If you want to be involved as a volunteer, you can? How does that work?

Amber Carroll: So, anybody is welcome to be a volunteer; typically, 18 years and older. A lot of the people, as I said, are participants in the program. We really try to nurture participants to become volunteers. That might come from, we have monthly facilitator support groups. And often in those groups, we'll have a group of facilitators who might target a person or two, who has been a participant on the group to say, "Ooh, I think that person might be really good." So, then we kind of pounce on that and try to encourage folks to volunteer within the community.

The influx we saw in COVID was really just people reaching out saying, "I'm not sure what's going on with my job right now. I'd like to volunteer." And the other thing is that the shame associated with loneliness and social isolation that we've historically seen, is this has really opened up the door for everyone to talk about this.

And people are wanting to reach out for connection. Our biggest challenge with Well Connected is we have to plan our programming so far in advance. That wasn't always able to work out, although we did get a lot of volunteers. We did throw in a lot of addendum programming in your neck of the woods. The Art Institute of Chicago just said, "Hey, we're going to add an extra 10 groups for you guys," just to provide more connection opportunity for our members. So, we're able to do that.

And with a lot of the volunteers who we couldn't put to work right away, we actually started a side project of sending letters to all of the Well Connected community members, all of the Social Call participants. And then we had so many volunteers that we started extending the offer to other organizations and housing communities. We wrote over 7,000 handmade letters to older adults across the country, just because volunteers wanted a way to connect with other people.

Ricky Enger: That's amazing. And I'd say that connection has sort of been a theme throughout this entire interview, which I guess is not a surprise, given that the program is called Well Connected. But you've been the director for a little while and the organization has been around for even longer. Do you think, when you hear all of these stories from people, because I'm sure you have. People saying, "Wow, this has changed my life," or, "Wow, if this hadn't been here, I don't know what I would've done." Is there any kind of common thing or just anything that you would share with listeners who might be interested in participating, the testimonials that you hear from those who are already a part of it?

Amber Carroll: That is the joy, is these testimonials and we have a vocal community. So, if we're doing something wrong, we are going to hear about it loud and clear. On the flip side, when we're doing things right, we hear about it. So that is just a joy of doing this. And I actually, I pulled a couple of quotes out and I'd like to just share one with you, if I may.

This is a 66-year-old blind participant from Illinois. And she said, "Going blind as an older person has left me socially inept. Discovering Well Connected has so helped me learn to live again. I found that I should not give up on life. I find the activities to be very stimulating and very helpful. I enjoy the diversity. I enjoy being able to socially connect seven days a week, if I choose to. I also find so many of the conversations have been helpful for me. I feel uninhibited to speak on anything of my choosing and to not feel that I could be rejected. Well Connected has been so inspirational for me. I've told so many of my relatives and friends about this venue in hopes that they will also find enjoyment in the fulfillment that I feel. If Well Connected no longer existed, I'm not quite sure what my life would be like again, but I also know that I don't ever want to have to experience that."

Ricky Enger: Yeah, and it's genuine for people. I mean, after that, how could you not want to be involved? So, for people who are interested in either learning more about how to volunteer or learning where to get a catalog, that kind of thing, are there ways that they can get in touch with Well Connected and just get started with those next steps?

Amber Carroll: So, if you want to email us, the email is Covia, that's C-O-V, as in Victor, I-A-connections@covia.org. And for our phone users, it's (877) 797-7299.

Ricky Enger: Excellent. And we'll have that information in our show notes as well, if you're checking it out that way. Amber, I want to thank you so much for taking a little time and telling us about this program. I think you're doing wonderful, wonderful things. When I'm just a bit older, I'd love to be involved myself.

Amber Carroll: We would love to have you, Ricky. As much crossover as we can have, because we advertise Hadley all the time, because you guys do such great programming as well. So, we're kind of, of the mindset that more is better when it comes to connections. So, as many resources as we can all share with each other is super helpful.

Ricky Enger: That’s what it's all about. Thank you so much, Amber, for joining us.

Amber Carroll: Thank you, Ricky. I appreciate it.

Ricky Enger: Got something to say? Share your thoughts about this episode of Hadley Presents or make suggestions for future episodes. We'd love to hear from you. Send us an email at podcast@hadley.edu. That's P-O-D-C-A-S-T@hadley.edu. Or leave us a message at (847) 784-2870. Thanks for listening.