

## **Walk My Way** **A Collaborative Walking Series**

*By Laura A. Van Dyke, LCSW  
Director, Department of Senior Services  
Township of West Orange*

Walk My Way is a collaborative walking series that developed out of a community coalition that began during the pandemic in May of 2020.

The coalition consists of members from West Orange, Montclair, South Orange, Maplewood, Millburn/Short Hills, Livingston, and the JCC located in West Orange. It started as the Essex “Covid-19 Community Coalition,” now refer to as the CCC Group. At that time, in the face of uncertainty, the group was created to advance a coherent vision to address the older, at-risk senior population, attempting in real time to find ways to help seniors manage through the crisis and adjust to the new normal. Inspired by the tri-state governor’s model who came together to develop regional solutions to the coronavirus they were motivated to try something similar.

The intention was to create a coalition reflective of shared values within Essex, an extremely diverse county. The group served to share critical information, resources, and activities offering a unique perspective of who is doing what and how. As time passed, we settled into a new normal over the early COVID years, getting through challenges like teaching older adults how to use Zoom technology, secure COVID vaccines, and place orders from the supermarket for contactless delivery. The group began to think about harnessing their power collaboratively; this included ideas like joint recreational activities.

Then, in 2022 in honor of Older American’s Month in May we decided upon a collective walking series open to all residents with 3 hosts, Montclair, SOMA and West Orange. It was a great way to gather together outside and move. The theme that year was *Age My Way*, and so we called our walking series *Walk My Way*.

Our residents enjoy the opportunity to attend walks of 1-2 miles in three different communities and often at varied park locations within each community. Included typically is an educational component such as with a historian or member of the Meadowland Park Conservancy speaking about the local terrain. We’ve partnered with organizations such as Homewatch Caregivers and Toni’s Kitchen for the refreshments at each event. In West Orange we’ve had volunteers from the West Orange Women’s Club as well as the Essex Regional Health Commission assist us as support along the routes.

We are now in our 3<sup>rd</sup> consecutive year. This year Montclair launched our walking series on May 7<sup>th</sup> at the new Wally Choice Community Center. It was a beautiful day with a large crowd who were delighted to be in a new setting. We were glad to see many of our West Orange residents there. SOMA will follow in August and West Orange will complete the series on Thursday, September 19<sup>th</sup>.

Many residents look forward to the chance to learn about parks they would not otherwise visit saying things like, “I can’t believe how close this park is to us, I’m going to come again. Or “I’ve lived here for x number of years and never knew this was here”.

We know the value of connection and how it is now more important than ever; the act of extending ourselves and connecting beyond the geographic boundaries of our communities is a good blueprint for an Age-Friendly Jersey, don't ya think?!