

Northwoods Partners 2025 Annual Report
Executive Director/ Caregiver Consultant Lisa Porthan
Annual Report Data from January 1 to December 31st 2025
Annual Fiscal Year January 1 2025-December 31st 2025

Mission Statement

The mission of Northwoods Partners is to provide resources
that promote independence and healthy aging

Vision

A community where people are able to age with dignity

Values

Compassion Relationships
Dignity Respect
Independence Volunteerism

Board of Directors

Kathy Neiman	Sheila Gruba	
Chris Braun	Marge Forsberg	Evelyn Kuzma
Heather Fitzgerald	Walt Leino	Abby Sirek
Dick Flesvig	Dave Nichols	Sid Thomson
Wendy Norcross	Caroline Owens	Mary Zupancich

Staff

Lisa Porthan Executive Director/ Caregiver Consultant
Heidi Vanderbeek Care Coordinator
Elsie Jorgensen Administrative Assistant

Volunteers and staff spent over 15,000 hours serving area seniors and caregivers from January 1 through December 31st, 2025.

Twenty-three board & committee members provided approximately 1500 hours of volunteer service to Northwoods Partners.

In 2025, Northwoods Partners recruited, trained, and coordinated 100 volunteers. Of those enrolled in our volunteer program, 85 served as active volunteers, providing essential support to older adults across our service area. Volunteer coordination and time management are tracked through our Elderberry software system, which ensures effective scheduling, accountability, and program oversight.

Volunteers receive annual training and are surveyed each year to gather feedback and suggestions to continuously improve the volunteer experience. Volunteer contributions are recognized through multiple avenues, including a Volunteer Appreciation Dinner, a November Appreciation Reception, social media recognition, newspaper advertisements, handwritten letters of gratitude, and appreciation gifts.

In 2025, Northwoods Partners volunteers contributed more than 15,000 hours of service, representing an estimated value of \$521,850, according to the *Value of Volunteer Time* report by the Do-Good Institute. We are deeply grateful for our volunteers' love, passion, dedication, selflessness, talents, and generous commitment of time in support of Northwoods Partners and the older adults we serve.



Transportation Program

Transportation is a significant barrier for older adults who wish to remain independent. Without access to groceries, medical appointments, or community activities, seniors are less able to thrive and remain safely in their homes. In service of Northwoods Partners, volunteers traveled more than **80,000 miles** in 2025 to help older adults maintain their independence and quality of life.

- **Local Transportation Program:**

This volunteer-supported program provides rides to and from essential local services, including errands such as grocery shopping, banking, haircuts, and local medical appointments. Volunteers also transport older adults to meetings, social events, and religious services. In 2025, nearly **300 local rides** were provided to older adults in our service area.

- **Long-Distance Medical Transportation:**

Long-distance rides are provided specifically for out-of-town medical appointments. Through our network of volunteer drivers, Northwoods Partners helps older adults access specialty care that is critical to maintaining their health and independence. This service is especially vital in northern Minnesota, where residents often must travel long distances to receive specialized medical care.

Volunteer drivers ensure older adults are safely escorted from their homes to appointments and back again. Drivers are reimbursed by Northwoods Partners for mileage, and clients are encouraged to donate to help sustain the program. In 2025, volunteer long-distance drivers traveled **more than 50,000 miles**, providing **over 700 rides** to out-of-town medical appointments.



Exercise Programs

Northwoods Partners offers a variety of programs designed to help community members take a preventative approach to living well through accessible exercise opportunities. In 2025, **150 older adults** participated in Northwoods Partners exercise programs.

Northwoods Partners continues to work closely with the Arrowhead Well Care Network to integrate delivery networks of evidence-based programs by creating reliable pathways that connect healthcare providers, community organizations, public health, and health plans. Through these partnerships, Northwoods Partners connects individuals to programs that provide education, fitness instruction, and self-care strategies. These efforts support the development of a strong “well-care” culture that complements our mission.

Exercise Programs Offered:

- **Tai Ji Quan / Weight Training Combination Class:**
Participants who have completed the 12-week Tai Ji Quan program are eligible for this combination class, which includes a 30-minute Tai Ji Quan routine followed by 30 minutes of functional fitness weight training. This program has been enhanced through a successful collaboration with the gym located in our new building.
- **Chair Yoga:**
Chair Yoga is taught by a certified yoga instructor and offers a gentle form of exercise that includes modified yoga stretches and postures. This class has been a wonderful addition to our wellness offerings, increasing accessibility for older adults with varying mobility levels.
- **Stepping On:**
Stepping On is an evidence-based fall prevention program for older adults, focused on reducing fall risk through education and practical strategies. The course addresses real-life scenarios to help participants identify and reduce risks at home and in daily activities. In 2025, Northwoods Partners offered two seven-week sessions, with 36 participants completing the program. Participants reported improved balance and a reduction in falls.

This program represents a strong collaboration with healthcare professionals, primarily from the Ely-Bloomenson Hospital physical therapy and pharmacy departments.

- **SAIL (Stay Active and Independent for Life):**

SAIL is a strength, balance, and fitness program for older adults that meet twice weekly for one-hour sessions. Participants engage in exercises designed to improve strength, balance, and overall fitness, helping them remain active and reduce their risk of falls. The evidence-based SAIL curriculum supports long-term independence and healthy aging.

- **Northwoods Partners Community Exercise Group:**

The Community Exercise Group meets weekly for one hour in a local church basement. In 2025, 15 individuals participated. This class appeals to older adults who enjoy exercising in a group setting to increase physical activity, reduce fall risk, and improve overall well-being. The program also offers valuable social connection, with participants gathering before each class for refreshments and conversation.

- **New! Dance for Joy:**

The *Dance for Joy* class was led by two professional dancers who spend their summers in Ely. Each session focused on building rhythmic ability, core strength, and flexibility, with later classes introducing more advanced movement sequences. All classes were accompanied by diverse musical selections, creating an engaging and joyful experience for participants. Class size averaged 15 participants per session.



Social Engagement Opportunities

Social engagement opportunities are essential to the health and well-being of older adults. Northwoods Partners offers a variety of programs designed to foster connection and build community, including Coffee & Cards with Evelyn, Coffee Connection (a women's group), and Memories & Movement (a weekly men's group). In addition, Northwoods Partners provides cooking classes, educational opportunities, and welcoming program spaces where individuals can gather, connect, and form meaningful relationships.

Regular social engagement plays a critical role in supporting mental health by reducing loneliness, depression, and anxiety, while also strengthening self-esteem and a sense of purpose. Staying connected within the community also supports cognitive and physical health by encouraging older adults to remain active, engaged, and socially connected.



Our Friendly Visit Program connects individuals who may be homebound or living alone with compassionate volunteer visitors. This program helps reduce isolation and strengthens connections to the community.

Participants and volunteers alike share how meaningful it is to build new friendships, exchange life stories, and support one another through joys and challenges. Client's report feeling heard, valued, and cared for—benefits that contribute to improved health and overall well-being.



- **Men's Memories & Movement**

Northwoods Partners' Men's Memories & Movement group continues to meet weekly at the Ely Area Community Hub/Northwoods Partners program space, with up to sixteen participants attending each session. This group provides a positive diversion that stimulates the mind while encouraging physical activity. Individuals experiencing Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI) are welcomed and encouraged to participate, as the group offers a safe, supportive, and inclusive environment for all.

The relationships formed through Memories & Movement have extended beyond weekly meetings, leading to meaningful social connections and mutual support outside of class time. Participants gather for outdoor barbecues, movie outings, and friendly visits in one another's homes, and they support each other through illness and end-of-life journeys. Northwoods Partners also partnered with the American Legion Auxiliary to provide snacks for the group. Participants frequently share that this program is the best part of their week.

- **Coffee & Connections**

Coffee & Connections is Northwoods Partners' women's coffee group, meeting every Monday. This group provides a welcoming space for women to connect, engage in conversation, and build meaningful relationships. Coffee & Connections is a new program launched in 2025 and has already become a valued opportunity for social engagement.



Tasty Tuesday Cooking Classes

Tasty Tuesday is held on the third Tuesday of each month in the Northwoods Partners program room at the Ely Area Community Hub. This cooking class is led by an area chef, Northwoods Partners volunteers, and occasional guest chefs who share special recipes and cooking techniques. The class focuses on healthy eating, often featuring cost-effective and accessible recipes.

Tasty Tuesday has been extremely popular, frequently reaching maximum capacity. Participants enjoy tasting the dishes that are prepared while spending time connecting with others in a relaxed, social setting. In 2025, more than fifty individuals participated in this program.

Northwood's Memory Care Program

Northwoods Partners helps guide individuals living with Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia, along with their caregivers and families, through every stage of the disease. We provide resources, referrals, and consultation designed to reduce stress and strengthen family and community support. In collaboration with local partners, we also work to make Ely and our broader service area more dementia-friendly and inclusive.

Our Caregiver Consultant spent more than six hundred hours this year supporting caregivers, care receivers, and family members navigating dementia-related challenges. Over fifty caregivers, care receivers, and family members benefited from participation in the Northwoods Memory Program in 2025.

The Northwoods Memory Program provides the following support:

- **CaregiverSupportandConsultation**
A monthly caregiver support group and individualized, one-on-one consultation services. Our trained Caregiver Consultant uses evidence-based approaches to support family members and others caring for a loved one with dementia. Services often include family meetings to develop care plans, problem-solving, and provide practical tools for managing challenging behaviors.
- **SocialandEngagementOpportunities**
Programs such as Memories & Movement, a variety of exercise classes, and companion care/friendly visiting services help reduce isolation and support emotional well-being.
- **ResourceLibrary**
A lending library offering educational literature and videos for caregivers, families, healthcare professionals, and volunteers to promote understanding and best practices in dementia care.
- **REACHProgramServices**
Our Caregiver Consultant is a trained REACH (Resources for Enhancing Alzheimer's Caregiver Health in the Community) facilitator, providing structured assessments and evidence-based intervention services to support caregiver health and resilience.
- **DementiaActivityKits**
Activity kits designed to engage individuals living with dementia, stimulate cognitive function, and reduce stress. These kits also equip caregivers with tools and resources to build confidence and enhance coping skills. The development of these kits fostered meaningful collaborations with local church groups, the community hospital, the local wellness center, and other community organizations with a shared commitment to dementia care.

Northwoods Partners and Essentia share a strong commitment to coordinated, integrated care between primary care providers and community-based services for individuals living with Alzheimer's disease and other dementias. Through this partnership, we continue to strengthen continuity of care, improve communication, and enhance service delivery. Together, we have developed shared communication tools, built strong working relationships, and improved coordination among patients, healthcare providers, and community resources—ultimately improving quality of life for individuals with dementia and their caregivers.

Healthy Aging Expo

The Annual Healthy Aging Expo is a daylong event dedicated to promoting healthy lifestyles, education, and caregiver support for older adults. The Expo also provides an opportunity for local businesses and community organizations to showcase resources and services that support healthy aging, as well as families and individuals living with Alzheimer's disease and other dementia-related disorders.

On May 15, 2025, more than one hundred and fifty attendees participated in the six-hour Expo and heard from fourteen experts in their respective fields. Presentations covered a wide range of topics essential to healthy aging and community well-being. Speakers included Abby Sirek and Tommy Teigan, who shared information on cardiovascular health, and the Ely-Bloomenson Community Hospital Physical Therapy Department, which presented strategies for maintaining mobility and physical function throughout the aging process.

Dr. Bianco from Essentia Health discussed the current state of healthcare and its impact on our community. Dementia 101 was presented by Edie Renner and Wendy Norcross, both experienced advocates for the Alzheimer's Association who have worked closely with individuals and families affected by dementia. Additional presentations by Helen Tome and Peggy Stolley from the Ely Community Health Center highlighted community resources and strategies to increase access to healthcare. Lisa Porthan and Heidi Vanderbeek shared insights on exercise programs and emphasized the importance of community connection in overall health.

Participants leave the Healthy Aging Expo with a renewed sense of confidence and motivation to make healthier choices. They gain practical knowledge and tools to incorporate healthy habits into daily life empowering them to thrive, not just survive.



Caregiver Consulting Services/ Resource & Referral

Northwoods Partners provides information, education, resource and referral services, coordination, and training for caregivers, community members, and healthcare providers.

- **CommunicationandOutreach**

Our website and social media platforms are used to share program information and maintain an up-to-date calendar of classes and events.

- **ResourceDistribution**

Resource lists, brochures, the *Senior Reporter*, the St. Louis County Caregiver Guide, and other educational materials are distributed as needed to support caregivers and community members.

- **ReferralandCollaboration**

Collaborations with local and countywide service providers create an effective referral network, including the use of Release of Information (ROI) forms when appropriate.

- **AdvanceCarePlanning**

Our Caregiver Consultant is a certified facilitator for Advanced Healthcare Directives. During intake, Northwoods Partners clients are asked whether they have a healthcare directive. Those who do not are provided with the appropriate forms and education on the importance of advance care planning.

- **FamilySupportandMediation**

The Caregiver Consultant is certified in Family Mediation and provides guidance and facilitation during family meetings to support communication and decision-making.

- **ResourceLibrary**

A comprehensive resource library is available and includes books, DVDs, games, puzzles, craft supplies, music, and other engagement tools to support care receivers and caregivers.

RespiteandHospiceSupport

Northwoods Partners continues to coordinate volunteer support for individuals caring for chronically ill, homebound loved ones. We also maintain a strong partnership with Essentia Health Hospice & Palliative Care, which includes referrals, distribution of brochures and flyers, and volunteer recruitment as needed.

WhoWeServe

Northwoods Partners serves older adults, individuals living with chronic illness, and caregivers and their families. The majority of our clients are considered low income under the 2025 Federal Poverty Guidelines. Services are provided within an approximately 480-square-mile service area, including Ely, Winton, Babbitt, Tower, Soudan, and surrounding townships.

Volunteer Heart of Gold Winners 2025

Volunteers are the heart and soul of Northwoods Partners. In 2025, over 100 individuals gave generously of their time, talents, and love to our community. Each year, Northwoods Partners honors two to three individuals who go above and beyond in their dedication to advancing the mission and work of NP.



Board of Directors & Staff

Fourteen devoted, passionate volunteers guide and oversee the important work of Northwoods Partners.

In 2025, Elsie Jorgensen joined our staff as our Administrative Assistant & Tai Ji Quan instructor! She is a wonderful addition, and we are grateful to have her & Heidi on staff.

“Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.” — Helen Keller



Intergenerational programs

Northwoods Partners works closely with Ely Community Resource to offer intergenerational activities. Bringing together different age groups fosters mutual learning, shared experiences, and a stronger sense of community.



Fundraising events – Festival of Trees & Our Theme Dinner

Northwoods Partners is supported through a combination of grants, donations, and fundraising events. Our two major annual fundraisers include the Festival of Trees and the annual Theme Dinner. Community support is crucial to our mission and to the continued existence of Northwoods Partners.

