



The SHIP program volunteer counselors are, from left, Bill Boyle, Deborah Brann, Ginger Brockwehl, Tom Murphy and Brenda Bocek.

SHIP makes even greater impact with more volunteers

The State Health Insurance Assistance Program counselors recently wrapped up their busiest time of year after welcoming new volunteers this season.

During open enrollment, which ran from Oct. 15 through Dec. 7, the five counselors recorded 197 client contacts and 136 total hours. The majority of these contacts were at the SHIP office in the Porter County Aging and Community Services building, but some were by phone or email.

SHIP is a free and unbiased counseling program provided by the Indiana Department of Insurance for Medicare beneficiaries in Indiana. Throughout the year, SHIP counselors assist those new to Medicare as well as those who've been on it for years.

"We're here year-round for any issue someone has related to Medicare," said SHIP volunteer and local coordinator Ginger Brockwehl. "During the six-week open enrollment period, we were all pretty booked."

Ginger, along with veteran volunteers Deborah Brann and Tom Murphy, welcomed new volunteers Bill Boyle and Brenda Bocek.

Boyle and Bocek also work as volunteers with Brockwehl at the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program through the United Way of Porter County.

"I was a teacher for 38 years," Boyle said. "I needed something to do to keep me busy. There are a lot of people who need help, plus I learn a lot. I have learned a lot also as a volunteer with VITA."

“I will be using Medicare myself in the next seven to eight years,” Bocek said. “I didn’t know much about it. I thought it would be beneficial not only for me, but also to help others understand how the program works.”

All SHIP counselors have five full days of classroom training, lots of Q&A exercises and time watching the experienced counselors in action.

“We had them shadow every experienced counselor at least once so they could see different styles,” Brockwehl said. “One of our experienced counselors then shadows the new counselor and when it was mutually agreed, they went out on their own.

“They both really became bonafide counselors during the open enrollment period. They had lots of experience helping with open enrollment and the drug plans.”

All volunteer counselors have to attend two half-day trainings a year to stay up-to-date on regulations and with any changes.

“Even though we are more experienced, we don’t know all of the answers either,” Brockwehl said. “We have people at the state level - SHIP employees who have a lot more experience. They are resources to all of us and often you can be with a client and call down to Indy to ask for help.”

Bocek said being a volunteer benefits both her and those she counsels.

“I like it because it is intense – both VITA and SHIP – and it really engages and keeps my mind going,” she said. “I have seen in the short time that I have been here, how we really help people who sometimes find it difficult to understand this. I have seen what a difference it makes for some people.”

SHIP counselors are available to answer questions and offer guidance year-round. To make an appointment, call (219) 464-1028 or email SHIP@portercountyacs.org.