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Matthews employees learn how to connect to community seniors



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Carolyn Steeves

North Carolina's 65 and older population will double over the next 20 years, from 1.2 million to 2.1 million, making it the state's fastest growing population, according to a 2009 study from the N.C. State Data Center. With that in mind, on Wednesday, March 16, Matthews town employees attended a "Connecting Community to Seniors—Aging Sensitivity and Communications" training session. It was presented by the Centralina Area Agency on Aging as a Crossroads Charlotte initiative.

The staff reviewed all of their preconceptions about aging and the elderly. They learned that, "Aging is not an illness, it's a process." It's a process that everyone goes through.

In addition to discussing the group's preconceptions, the Agency on Aging presented various ways that the staff could accommodate the elderly.

Some of the tips were using bigger fonts, not using fonts with a serif, removing distractions, allowing more time for paperwork and always making eye contact and speaking clearly.

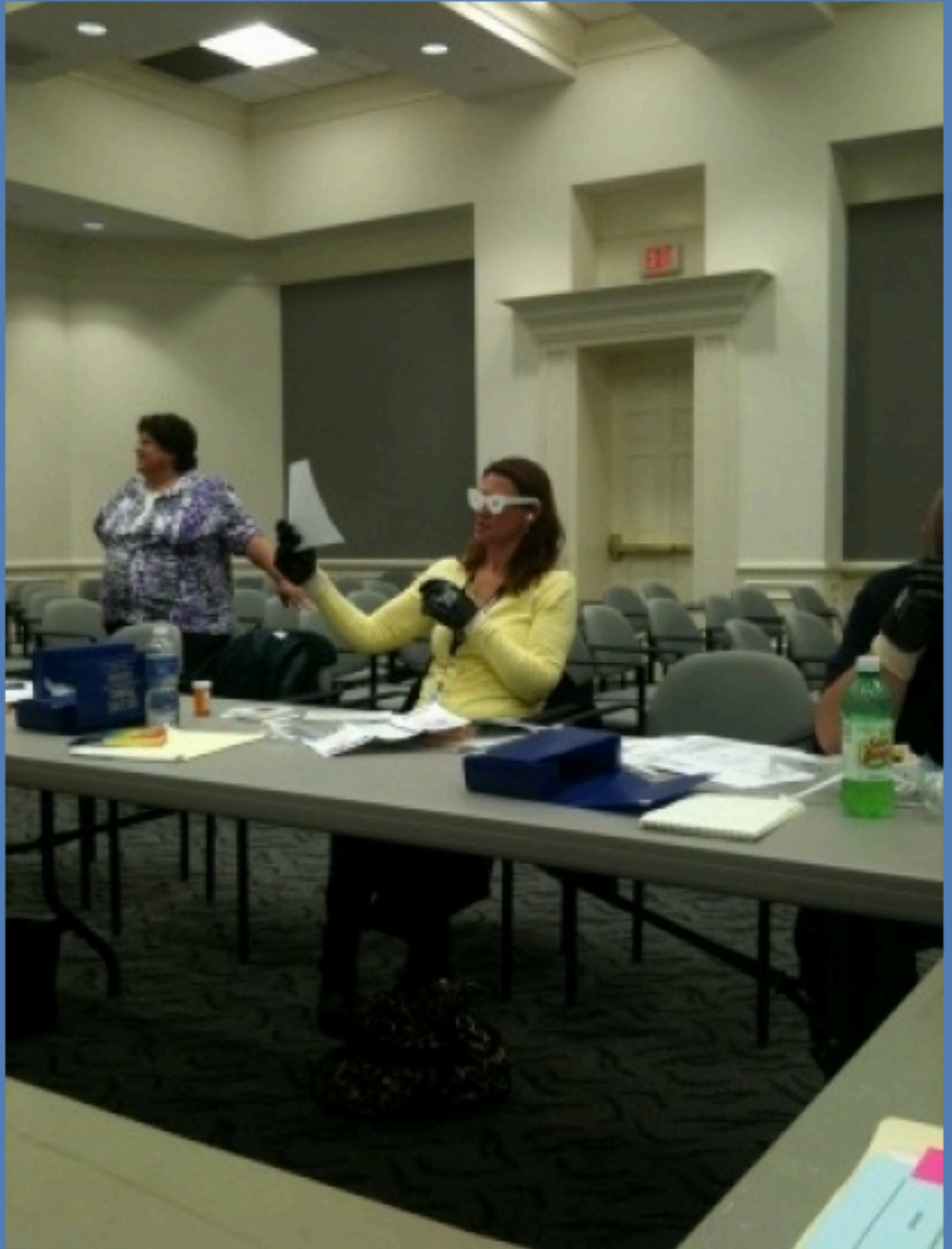
One part of the training was an "instant aging" simulation. Participants put corn in their shoes, stuffed cotton balls in their ears, put on special gloves and wore special glasses to simulate the effects of aging. The glasses imitated vision problems caused by glaucoma, macular degeneration, cataracts, a stroke or yellowing of the lens from UV exposure.

While wearing the gloves and the glasses, the participants had to walk around the room, read a bus schedule, thread a needle, sort medication and other everyday tasks.

The participants remarked that it was frustrating, tiring, time-consuming and a little depressing.

"I learned that a lot of the perceptions I had about aging were wrong," said Finance Specialist Lindsey Outen. "That it is more of a process than a disease. It was very interesting."

The session made Town Engineer C.J. O'Neill more aware of the elderly. "I think I'll be more cognizant of some of the things that they may be working through when I communicate with the aging population or the elderly, both in work and my everyday life," he said.



Matthews employee Rosalind Wooten attempts to read a bus schedule during the instant aging exercise.

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