

URGENT CARE HOUSE CALL

Community paramedics aim to prevent return visits to hospital

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STAFF WRITER

Getting urgent health care doesn't always mean a trip to the hospital.

For those just getting back home and trying to recover, there's a simpler way. The Community Paramedic program helps patients with in-home procedures, and aims to reduce return visits to the emergency room.

Jessica Marcum of the Umatilla County Fire District #1 runs the community paramedic program, in conjunction with Good Shepherd Medical Center's community health program. She said the program gets referrals from the hospital, the fire department, and from local doctors.

"If they're concerned with someone falling, or haven't seen their patient in a while, they may be too busy to get to them that day," Marcum said. The program, free to patients, started in June of 2017, and is available to hospital patients throughout Umatilla and Morrow counties.

People recently released



STAFF PHOTO BY E.J. HARRIS

Paramedic Jessica Marcum, center, listens to Ellen Minardi, right, while visiting on Tuesday at Regency Hermiston Nursing and Rehabilitation Center in Hermiston. Also photographed is community health worker Nazario Rivera.

from the hospital can call any time they have a health concern. Paramedics will conduct home visits and perform simple tests, such as urinalysis, complete blood count and blood pressure checks. They will make sure a patient is taking the right medicines.

"Forty percent or more of people on Medicare are not taking their medication correctly," Marcum said.

They assess the safety of a patient's home, and advise them on potential hazards such as slippery rugs or the need for hand rails.

Visits can be as frequent

as patients see fit.

"It's kind of on a case-by-case basis," Marcum said. "Some people we'll see only once, and others we check in weekly for a month or so."

"They offered to come to my house and check on me, just to ensure I was doing OK and allay my fears if I had any," said Karin Gehlen, a Umatilla resident who had several hospital visits throughout the winter.

Gehlen said she doesn't use the service too often, but someone from the program will call and check on her from time to time.

Each patient will be seen

by a paramedic and a community health worker from the hospital's ConneXions program.

They've been working with Ellen Minardi, a Hermiston resident who had been hospitalized for several bad falls, for close to a year.

Community paramedics will usually visit the patient at their home, but will also make visits to assisted living or care facilities, if that's where a patient is staying.

"We generally try to figure out what to do to get them back home," Marcum said.

Minardi is currently at

Regency Hermiston. At a visit to Regency last week, Marcum and community health worker Nazario Rivera checked in with Minardi, asking her questions about how recovery is going, and how she's adjusted to living in an assisted facility.

Minardi said she's found the program useful, but had to get used to the idea of someone helping her with basic tasks.

"When I broke my pelvis, I was laying there actually thinking, how am I going to manage this situation?" she said. "It took a bit of talking for me to consider."

But she said now she's glad she accepted the help.

"They make it easier at times when it's going pretty bad in life," she said.

The ConneXions worker will put the patient in touch with community resources they might need.

"The main thing is primary care providers," said Rivera. "We help fill out housing applications. Food can be an issue, so we connect people with food banks, WIC, or DHS."

They may also help patients assess whether they need to move to an assisted care facility, or whether they need in-home care.

The community paramedics will also help refer patients to other services.

Virginia Salter, a patient

who is being treated for myelodysplastic anemia, a condition that can progress to leukemia, has used the program once.

"I think they've kind of left the ball in my court," she said. "I asked them what I could call about, and they said I could call them any time I need if I'm not feeling myself and need them to check my vitals."

Salter said she feels a little reluctant to call because she didn't want to bother them needlessly.

"I did find it helpful to have a resource short of 911," she said.

But Marcum encouraged patients not to be hesitant about asking for help.

"They can still call me for reassurance," Marcum said. "If it's something I feel is more appropriate for the doctor, maybe I can go out and see if I can gather information for the doctor."

The program was funded by the Local Community Advisory Council grant in its first year, and the department just received an Eastern Oregon Coordinated Care Organization grant.

Marcum said currently, community paramedics see 15 or 20 patients, but there's potential for the program to grow.

Contact UCFD for more information about the Community Paramedic program, at 541-567-8822.

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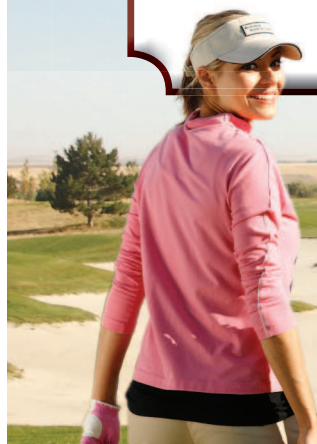
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