Fighting Falls with Fire

Partnering with the Fire Department to Decrease Falls Among Older Adults

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Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been numerous emergencies that have warranted valiant response from the nation’s first responders and frontlines workers. After all, in California September brings what we have come to know as “fire season.” Pandemic and “fire season” aside, there is another key issue that impacts the lives of older adults and their loved ones – falls. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), falls are the leading cause of fatal and nonfatal injuries among adults aged 65 and older. While they are common and costly, the good news is that they are preventable.

In 2015, Partners in Care Foundation (Partners) in Los Angeles was awarded a two-year Administration for Community Living Fall Prevention demonstration grant to implement evidence-based programs to reduce both the risk and actual number of older adult falls. Partners’ application was supported by the California Departments of Aging (CDA) and the California Emergency Services Medical Authority (EMSA). Support from EMSA was spurred by a 2014 Community Paramedicine Pilot program that allowed paramedics in several counties to perform activities beyond their traditional role of transporting individuals to hospital emergency rooms. The goal of community paramedicine is to provide additional training to paramedics and Emergency Medical Services (EMS) so they can provide alternatives to emergency department visits and hospital admissions, all the while improving health, improving patient experience, and reducing health care costs.

Among the issues the paramedics in the pilot counties would be able to address was providing referrals into nonemergency services that assist in meeting individuals’ physical, psychological, and social needs. The overall goal of these referrals being the reduction in frequent EMS use. Since 911 callers who fall repeatedly can comprise a significant number of “911” responses, it seemed a perfect opportunity to create a joint approach in identifying and proactively responding to individuals with the greatest fall risks.

In 2017, Partners received another three years of funding from the Administration for Community Living to continue implementing fall prevention programs in six counties in California and to deepen its partnership with EMS. In Los Angeles County, Partners has collaborated with four fire departments (Arcadia Fire Department, Torrance Fire Department, Los Angeles Fire Department, and Beverly Hills Fire Department) to pilot four different models for referring frequent 911 callers to evidence-based fall prevention programs and case management services, when applicable. The goal for all pilots was to
decrease fall risk and individuals’ fear of falling, and to decrease unnecessary hospital admissions for fall-related injuries.

In Arcadia, a team of agencies including the UCLA Center for Prehospital Care, Chiefs of the Arcadia Fire Department, and Partners collaborated to introduce the three-minute STEADI intervention to fire department staff and educate them about A Matter of Balance (MOB). Through this pilot, firefighters and EMS staff administered the CDC’s three-minute STEADI intervention and disseminated STEADI brochures to older adults in the community who dialed 911 after suffering from a fall. The brochures included a falls self-assessment and information about home safety, and the team of agencies inserted a letter with information about how to enroll in a local MOB workshop.

To date in Arcadia, Partners staff have conducted three trainings to orient Arcadia firefighters and EMS staff to the three-minute STEADI fall prevention intervention and the MOB program. The first eight-week MOB participant workshop took place in January 2017 at the City of Arcadia’s Recreation Center, attracting 15 participants for the workshop. Two additional workshops in June 2018 and January 2019 followed with excellent enrollment.

In partnership with the Los Angeles Fire Department, Partners provided health coaching to 911 “frequent callers/users,” and other callers in need of community-based services. Starting in June 2016, trained health coach(es) assisted individuals referred by the fire department’s nurse practitioner unit to better manage their healthcare needs, including making connections with a regular doctor, arranging transportation, and linking them to services from other key community programs, including referrals into evidence-based programs provided in the community by Partners.

In Torrance, Partners collaborated with the Torrance Fire Department to develop an 8-page fall prevention brochure derived from the CDC’s STEADI materials, which also includes an insert referring them to the next MOB workshop in the City of Torrance with a phone number to sign up. In recognition of the fact that individuals may not be in the best state of mind to receive a referral to fall prevention program immediately after a fall, the Fire Department’s resident EMS Coordinator pulls a monthly list of individuals who dialed 911 for assistance following a fall, and the brochure is mailed to the individual. In addition to this effort – since 2017 – the City of Torrance has conducted an annual Senior Safety Fair during Fall Prevention Awareness Week, which generates great interest from community members in enrolling in a MOB workshop and allows residents easy access to other fall prevention resources and vendors in their community. To date, a total of seven MOB workshops have been held in the City of Torrance, reaching over 90 older adults and caregivers. Residents of the City of Torrance continue to participate in MOB during the pandemic, as Partners is serving as a pilot program implementation site for MaineHealth’s virtual MOB curriculum.

Finally, in 2020 Partners received a contract from the City of Beverly Hills to provide fall prevention and case management services with the City and the Beverly Hills Fire Department. A combination of previously piloted models, Partners has an embedded case manager within City of Beverly Hills who works with the Fire Department’s Nurse Practitioner to identify and provide care for the City’s vulnerable residents. The case manager may refer individuals into evidence-based fall prevention programs. Additionally, Partners is working with the City’s local television station to produce a series of videos to spotlight the importance of fall prevention and introduce residents to local falls-related resources and workshops.
Partners’ latest three-year funding cycle awarded by the Administration for Community Living in 2020 is a perfect complement to the agency’s contract with the City of Beverly Hills. Each of the aforementioned collaborations have not only required dedication of hard green dollars to reduce falls; they have also required in-kind effort from EMS and fire personnel – all of whom have many duties, but regard fall prevention with utmost importance. So, while we may be familiar with the saying “fight fire with fire,” this Fall Prevention Awareness Month let’s also remember that we can fight falls with fire.