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Meals on Wheels starts program to help seniors after they leave the hospital

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POSTED: 06:08 p.m. EST, Feb 06, 2010

MASSILLON: Meals on Wheels of Stark & Wayne Counties is launching an effort to help older adults who are released from the hospital.

President Teresa Barry said there is a definite need for nutritional supplements for people who have just been released from the hospital.

An effort was launched nationally two years ago by an insurance company to offer the supplements, but it was not started in Stark and Wayne counties.

Barry said the potential for the number of older adults who could be helped is huge.

Statistics from the Ohio Hospital Association note that more than 33,000 men and women 60 and older are discharged from hospitals in Stark and Wayne counties each year. Mercy Medical Center Chief Financial Officer Michael Rieger estimates his hospital alone releases more than 5,000 each year.

Statistics from the Medicare office in Ohio indicate a return rate of nearly 20 percent for patients 65 and older.

"I'm totally blown away by the numbers," Barry said. "And I am just as depressed by the lack of referrals that we've gotten.

"You can't tell me that a lot of those seniors aren't in need of immediate nutritional support. It's sad, but we're not getting the referrals and we've been tracking that for the last five years."

Right now, the referrals number about one a month.

"We have to find out what the problem is — people too busy to get in touch with us, people just figure the seniors' family will take care of them," Barry said. "Then we have to address it and make this work. It's really sad that it's at this level. We want to make things better for the seniors."

Barry said the heart of the problem is that Meals on Wheels doesn't have a referral base from the hospitals in Stark and Wayne counties, the program's primary service area.

"All they have to do [at the hospital] is send us fax," Barry said. "Or have a doctor or nurse or some other personnel call us. Or have a relative of the person call us. It's really that simple. But it must be within five days of their release from the hospital."

Barry said one of the major keys in keeping seniors from being readmitted to the hospital for the same problem is proper nutrition.

"If you can get a nutritional supplement into the seniors who have just been released from the hospital as soon as possible," Barry said, "it dramatically reduces the probability that they will return to the hospital for the same problem within 30 days."

HUMANA started the Five-Day Nutritional Program on a national level two years ago, but didn't include Stark and Wayne counties.

Meals on Wheels helps to deliver the five-day packages of frozen food to older adults in 23 other counties in Ohio, along with one in Pennsylvania and seven in West Virginia.

"We either delivered each package in person to each individual or had the packages shipped via UPS," Barry said. "We got the packages to the seniors who were just released from a local hospital."

Barry has applied for grants to put the program into action in Stark and Wayne counties.

Meals on Wheels received a \$2,000 grant in November from Subaru of America as part of Subaru's Share the Love campaign.

Walmarts in Stark and Wayne counties donated \$2,500 for the project.

It also received a \$1,000 grant from Innis Maggiore, a Canton-based public relations agency, in early January.

Meals on Wheels began delivering the five-day packages, which cost Meals on Wheels about \$30 each, to seniors who had been released from the hospital last week.

"We're rolling this out slowly," Barry said. "There is a concern we could be inundated.

"But to be honest with you, I hope we do get inundated. We are working hard to help people who need help and need information."

Barry said the ultimate goal is to help the seniors.

"I'm not worried about it getting too big. If it's as successful as we would like to be, we'll find the dollars to support it. The important thing is to get quality nutritional support in to these seniors as quickly as possible."

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