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SASH supports people who don't want to leave home

by Tena Starr

Graci Rudolph is in love with her job. She just wishes she had more people to work for.

Ms. Rudolph is a coordinator for a program called SASH, which stands for Support and Services At Home. She calls it one of the Northeast Kingdom's best kept secrets, and she finds that unfortunate.

SASH is designed to help anyone 65 or older who's eligible for Medicare, or anyone younger than that who has a disability. And it can help in a lot of ways. Plus it's free, which Ms. Rudolph wants to emphasize.

This is how it works: Anyone who chooses to participate gets a visit from Ms. Rudolph, or another coordinator, who assesses a person's situation. Are there medical problems? Financial problems? Physical problems such as needing a wheelchair ramp or hold bars in the shower?

And what does that person want? To stay at home and avoid a nursing home? Most people do want to stay at home as long as they can, Ms. Rudolph said. Her goal is to help manage that, or any other issue that may present itself so her clients can live the life they want.

"We coordinate with area resources and agencies to provide services to elders, or those with disabilities who fall through the cracks," she said.

Her mission is to make sure that no one does fall through the cracks, a challenge in a rural area.

The program is entirely funded through Medicare, which has found that it saves money, both for Medicare and for its recipients. On average, it saves Medicare about \$1,800 a year per person, Ms. Rudolph said. It's up in the air how much it saves participants.

"All of my services are free, the wellness nurse is free," Ms. Rudolph said. "We work together to make sure people are getting their needs met. How can we make your life easier?"

SASH started some years ago as a pilot program. But Medicare found the results interesting, and cost-saving, and has continued it. It turns out that an intervention program that keeps people in their homes as long as possible, or as long as they want, is an efficient one that not only increases quality of life, but also saves money.

“The intent is to keep people where they want to be,” Ms. Rudolph said.

For instance, a recent participant wanted to stay on his farm, and SASH was able to help him do that. Ms. Rudolph took a look at the situation – nutrition, medication, any physical help that might be needed – and came up with a plan.

Then she enlisted her vast resources, which include everything from the Orleans County Sheriff's Department to home health nurses.

And volunteers. She said she's always in the market for volunteers, who may serve on a one-time or ongoing basis. She said she needs an army of volunteers, who might do anything from reading to a lonely senior, to taking someone shopping, to church, or to a doctor. And there might be people with specific skills, who could build a wheelchair ramp, for instance.

Ms. Rudolph has run across two hindrances to her job. One is that people fear they can't afford her services; the other is that they reject what they see as charity. People also tend to fret that their privacy will be invaded, she said. But all information is completely private.

As for the charity part, she said she tells people they've paid in advance through Medicare already.

“I say, we've already paid for it with our tax dollars. People should be getting what they've already paid for. They say, I don't take government handouts. I say that's absolutely okay. This is not a handout. You've already paid for it. You've prepaid. You've earned it. That's my answer to them.”

Although SASH does not provide direct medical help, it does provide information, and resources, for people who aren't quite sure how to get what they need.

People can opt in, or opt out, Ms. Rudolph noted.

She's steadily working to ever increase her network of services, and just learned, for instance, that the Orleans County Sheriff's Department offers a daily call service to people, to make sure they are okay.

It's clear that Ms. Rudolph is on a mission, and she believes her program can help. Beyond that, she said she's made a lot of friends. One of her clients is an expert knitter, she said, who offered to teach her that skill in return for being taught how to quilt.

The job has been a joy, she said. For one thing, she gets to hear people's stories, and there are some remarkable ones. Loneliness can be an issue in itself, she noted, but she considers it a privilege to listen to her clients.

She's also a resource for families who have moved away from aging parents and are happy to know that someone is caring for them, and that they have a contact.

“I love this job. It's absolutely the best possible thing I could be doing. Even though a lot of people might have issues with health or aging. They have challenges, but there are so many things that can be done. I love being able to say I have good news. That's an exciting thing.”

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