

WIHA: Governor Evers proclaims September 2021 Falls Prevention Awareness Month as state efforts battle growing falls crisis

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(MADISON, WI) Wisconsin leads the nation in deadly falls among people age 65 and older – a distinction that has the attention of aging advocates and public health officials and has prompted a new statewide falls prevention initiative. Governor Evers recently declared September as Falls Prevention Awareness Month but recognizes that the prevalence and high cost of falls in Wisconsin is a year-round problem. In fact, one in four people in this age group will have a fall each year making older adult falls a growing public health crisis as Baby Boomers enter the ranks of higher-risk age groups.

Spending on older adults' injuries from falls tops \$1 billion annually in Wisconsin, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Wisconsin Department of Health Services statistics show that over 40,000 people age 65 and older went to the emergency department due to an unintentional fall injury, and more than 1,670 people died as a result of these injuries in 2019. Experts point out that while falls are common, they're not a normal part of aging. Falls can be prevented and a newly-formed state coalition is working to do just that. The coalition – led by the Wisconsin Institute for Healthy Aging (WIHA), a non-profit organization committed to spreading evidence-based health promotion programs and practices throughout Wisconsin – brings together injury prevention groups from around the state to increase awareness of and strategies for preventing falls in Wisconsin.

“Falls among older adults occur far too often in our state,” says DHS Secretary-Designee Karen Timberlake. “They can take a toll on a person’s physical, emotional, and financial well-being. And they are preventable. We have [good information](#) available for older adults, their families, and their care providers about what works to keep people safe from accidental falls. By implementing these proven approaches, we can reduce the frequency of falls and help our Wisconsin neighbors maintain their independence as they advance in age.”

Identifying patients at highest risk for a fall is a key component in preventing them. A clinical falls risk assessment tool can make fall screening routine and protect thousands of Wisconsin’s older adults from serious injuries like broken hips and traumatic brain injury. “Many fall-related risk factors can be addressed by health care providers,” says Julia Lubsen, MD, UW-Madison Assistant Professor of Family

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Medicine and Community Health. “Without a falls risk assessment, it is less likely that patients will receive effective interventions like physical therapy or an evidence-based falls prevention program.”

A significant number of people who fall lose their self-confidence and then avoid activities they feel may place them at risk for another fall according to Dave Nelson, WIHA executive director. “Inactivity often leads to social isolation, loss of muscle strength and worsening balance, which in turn, further increases their risk of

falling. It's a vicious cycle which has been exacerbated by the pandemic." Promoting practical lifestyle adjustments, home modifications, medication checks, evidence-based interventions, and community partnerships are all part of the prescription for substantially reducing falls among older adults.

Falls are also a leading cause of nursing home admissions, which often exhaust personal assets and increase the burden on Medicaid. Because Medicaid accounts for significant state spending, expanding the use of interventions that reduce falls can play a role in reducing Medicaid costs. One such program – Stepping On – has been researched and proven to decrease the incidence of falls by 31%. WIHA is the national license-holder and administrator of the 7-session program, which to date has been offered throughout the state with nearly 20,000 people age 60 or older participating. That, according to Nelson, is a great start, but there's plenty more to do. "We know that expanding local capacity to offer Stepping On and other falls prevention interventions translates to fewer falls," says Nelson. "We're so pleased to be joining forces with partners in health care, emergency services, community-based organizations and others to help people find strategies for avoiding a life-changing fall."