Caring For Seniors

By Katherine Hoyer

National Seniors Health & Fitness Day lands on May 31st and it is a day dedicated to seniors. The greater Coeur d’Alene area has a large senior population and with North Idaho receiving accolades such as “Best Place to Retire” and “12 Reasons to Move to Coeur d’Alene”, we can probably expect more seniors to come to our area. The baby boomer generation takes up a large percentage of the population in the United States and according to recent data people age 65 and older make up 21.5% of the population in our region.

This large population of seniors has created growing needs in our community that Panhandle Health is hoping to address. Panhandle recognizes that the aging population in the communities we serve are sometimes home-bound and in need of additional care or companionship within the comforts of their own home. That’s where two of our lesser-known programs, Senior Companions Program and our Home Health program, are beginning to make a huge impact.

Panhandle’s Home Health program offers quality, individualized clinical care in the comfort of your own home after a surgery or hospital stay. “Our Home Health program just received a 5-star rating in the Quality of Patient Care Star Rating from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS),” said Rousal Mahakam, Panhandle Health District Home Health program manager. “What makes our program unique is we serve all 5 northern counties and we accept all insurance. Ultimately, it’s our nurses, therapists and staff that made this possible and continue to keep our patients happy and well cared for.”

Panhandle Health is only 1 of 2 home health programs that has a 5-star rating in our area and also has a lower rehospitalization rate than state and national averages. According to CMS, the star ratings are an additional tool to assist consumers when they are faced with making the difficult decision in choosing a home health provider. The star ratings summarize the current measures of health care provider performance.

In addition to the Home Health Program, Panhandle also offers the North Idaho Senior Companions Program. The Senior Companion Program is a volunteer program that provides companionship to the elderly and disabled. Senior Companion volunteers don’t provide any clinical care, they are there as companions to talk, play cards or take seniors to the grocery store or other errands.

“I think we’re the best kept secret in North Idaho,” said Daniel Perry, Senior Companions Project Director for Panhandle Health. “They’re helping prevent our clients, these elderly people, from falling through the cracks, unseen, unheard,” Perry said. “This has to come from the heart.”
Perry said the goal of Senior Companions — a Senior Corps program that operates under the umbrella of The Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) — is to help the clients live as independently as possible. Services are offered to clients free of charge. The Senior Companion Program benefits the volunteer companions as well as the clients. A study launched in 2015 by CNCS found that 70 percent of senior volunteers experiencing depression before volunteering had fewer symptoms at the end of a year. Nearly the same percentage who reported feelings of isolations prior to serving as volunteers said that through their service they have improved social conditions. In North Idaho, 98 percent of volunteers report feeling more connected to their community, and 87 percent say they are more active because of the program.

This year on May 31st, help us celebrate National Seniors Health & Fitness Day by giving back and volunteering to help a senior in need or making sure they receive the best care in our area. Other senior programs at Panhandle, include our Fit & Fall Proof and our Medical Reserve Corps. Fit & Fall Proof is an exercise program designed to keep seniors fit and prevent injuries due to falls. These classes are offered at various locations around the community. Our Medical Reserve Corps (MRC) volunteers assist in emergency or natural disaster events. No medical training necessary. Since natural disasters aren’t happening often in our area, MRC volunteers stay up-to-date and connected with scheduled trainings and other volunteer activities.

If you would like to learn more about Panhandle’s programs for seniors, please visit www.panhandlehealthdistrict.org.

Katherine Hoyer is the Public Information Officer for Panhandle Health District.