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Seminar teaches seniors how to stay healthy

By JOY BLACKBURN

Friday, September 29th 2006



Daily News Photo by JOY BLACKBURN Nurse-practitioner Yvonne Washington-Turay speaks to seniors about how to age gracefully during a wellness workshop Thursday on St. Thomas.

ST. THOMAS - It seemed an unlikely spot for an explanation of the C-reactive protein blood test.

But on Thursday afternoon the sanctuary at the Seventh-day Adventist Church Philadelphia Congregation was the backdrop as nurse-practitioner Yvonne Washington-Turay explained to a group of senior citizens how they can take control of their own health care and age gracefully.

She touched on everything from healthy eating and exercise to chronic diseases that are prevalent in the territory and preventative health screenings they should be aware of.

She did so as one of three presenters during a wellness workshop - part of a new initiative that the V.I. Human Services Department is pushing to educate seniors on measures they can take to help maintain their own health.

Officials see the move as a win-win situation for the territory's seniors and for the department, which runs nursing homes and other programs for the elderly, including the State Pharmaceutical Assistance Program, which helps seniors with limited incomes purchase medications.

"We realized that our job is not only to give out medicine, but ... to look at lifestyle modification, prevention and promoting health and wellness," said Murlene Van Beverhoudt, assistant administrator of the Human Services Division of Senior Citizens Affairs.

Human Services had conducted the wellness program internally before, but Thursday's seminar was the first community outreach.

About 50 to 60 seniors gathered for the event, which also featured presentations by pharmacist Celia Victor and naturopath Wendy Coram.

The Pharmaceutical Assistance Program sponsored the seminar.

Eva Williams, administrator of the Senior Affairs Division, said the goals of the outreach are to equip seniors with the tools they need to make them better health care consumers, to help improve the quality of their lives and to help them be healthier and retain their independence.

If the programs are effective and seniors incorporate the information into their lives, the department also stands to gain - in terms of cost savings in the pharmaceutical program and other programs it runs for seniors with failing health, Williams said.

"If, in fact, we are able to do this, we save health dollars that can go into other things in the community," she said.

Victor, who is clinical compliance director for Human Services, said her goal as she talks to seniors about medications is to empower them by giving them the information they need about medications, their interactions and the questions they should be asking their health care providers.

"We have all this knowledge, but they can't take us home with them," Victor said.

"We want to give them that knowledge and empower them," she said.

The Rev. Trent Berg said he approached Human Services to find out what the department could do to help people at the church who are 55 and older, who make up about 45 to 50 percent of his congregation.

At the same time, the department was looking for a location in the community to conduct the senior wellness seminar.

The event was open to the community.

"You have to bring health care where people can get it," Victor said.

Williams said the division plans to conduct more of the seminars in the community after the start of the new fiscal year.

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