

Senior personal trainer Sara Heinzl, RN, guides Grass Valley resident Ruth Tremoureux through her arm-strengthening exercises.

Helping seniors to avoid falling

\$25,000 grant will fund integrated falls program

BY DAVE MOLLER
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When an elderly person falls at home it can often mean the beginning of a downhill slide in their health. But most people don't realize that many types of falls can be prevented.

Statistics say that more than 40 percent of the seniors who enter hospitals with hip fractures never go home or live independently again. According to the national Fall Prevention Center of Excellence, 25 percent of them die within a year.

Because of those startling statistics, the Nevada County Health and Human Services Agency recently received a grant for \$25,000 to address the problem through coordinating agencies that deal with seniors and their falls. At a recent meeting of the agencies, it was conceded that while elders are prone to falls, they can do things to prevent them, lengthen their lives and make less impact on medical and social costs in the community.

"Falls are preventable," according to Alison Lehman, the director of the county Department of Social Services, which landed the grant. With 25 percent of the county's population being elderly, she sees great potential for an integrated falls program here.

"Senior falls are a major cause of morbidity and mortality," said Jeff Brown, director of

Fall prevention tips

- Keep electrical cords out of walkways.
- Be careful of small rugs and make sure they don't slide.
- Put a non-skid surface in your bathtub and shower areas.
- Have handrails on all stairways.
- Have lights on all home entrances.
- Make sure all walkways around the home do not have cracks or holes.

Information from the Friendly Visitor Program of Nevada County

the county Health and Human Services Agency and Lehman's boss. But Brown said studies show home assessments and education, "can reduce the incidence of falls up to 60 percent."

When Brown was working in Alameda County, he witnessed a fall prevention program there that brought results.

"People would go into the homes and do safety assessments for potential tripping hazards," Brown said. Those might include badly placed throw rugs, extension cords and furniture placed in walkways.

Clients were also urged to put up hand rails in certain areas, including showers.

Medication management was also an issue, because many seniors have multiple doctors who give them prescriptions that may not mesh well and make patients dizzy and unsteady.

Other reasons for falls include poor nutrition, walking or standing incorrectly because of pain, urinary incontinence causing middle-of-the-night bathroom trips, sleep aids and anti-anxiety drugs.

As a registered nurse and personal trainer, Sara Heinzl of Grass Valley tries to prevent senior falls as part of her living.

She does physical assessments of homes and then outlines exercise regimens to strengthen older muscles.

"We lose 50 percent of our muscle mass by age 70 if we don't do something about it," Heinzl said. If a senior shuffles, she gives them exercises to regain their gait.

"One client's family brought me in because of her falls and she didn't have another one for a year," Heinzl said. "I did chair exercises with her and used weights on her ankles. I walked with her a lot and had her climbing stairs," with help. "She improved."

Christine Barnes' mother, Marjorie Barnes of Grass Valley, was one of Heinzl's patients for almost two years before she died in April.

"Mom had her appendix out at the age of 83 and was very weak, and she had dementia," Barnes said. "She couldn't remember to

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exercise and her balance was getting worse. I wanted to prevent a broken hip.”

Through exercises, Barnes’ mother became more ambulatory and was safer. “The less you move, the less you are able to move,” Barnes said.

“The sheer cost of falls to our health care system is phenomenal,” according to Sara Turner, the director of Sierra Nevada Home Care said.

“It’s very costly at a time when our health care system and particularly Medicare is at the brink. Just because you’re older doesn’t mean you have to fall.”

The fall discussion group will now talk about strategies over the next few months to come up with an integrated fall program. According to Lehman and Brown, the strategy will be used as an enticement to get more grant funding for implementation of a program.

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