



St. Mary's County Health Department

NEWS RELEASE

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TWO GRANT AWARDS STRENGTHEN HEALTH DEPARTMENT'S PUSH TO IMPROVE HEALTH AND SAFETY

LEONARDTOWN, MD (July 31, 2006) – Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene Center for Preventive Health Services has awarded St. Mary's County Health Department grants totaling \$6,000 for community education to make county residents aware of ways they can improve their health and safety.

The health department's Injury Prevention Program, in partnership with the Department of Aging and the Mental Health Authority, has identified two distinct prevention issues topping the list of public health concerns in St. Mary's County that will be addressed with funds provided from the grant awards. These issues, preventing falls among seniors and reducing the number of suicides, are marked as priorities for educational outreach in the coming year.

According to Erin Reiney, injury prevention coordinator at the health department, falls were the number one cause of all emergency department visits and hospitalizations in St. Mary's County in 2004. Of the more serious falls which required hospitalization, nearly three quarters were

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experienced by men and women age 55 and older.

The health department is combining resources with St. Mary's County Department of Aging to deliver messages to seniors that will help prevent dangerous falls. Seniors can learn about preventing falls at the annual Department of Aging Health Fair in October. "Our main message for Seniors is to act now to prevent dangerous situations in the future," explained Reiney. Having vision checked, exercising to maintain balance, having a health care provider review medicines, and making your home safer are all steps people can take to reduce their risk of falling. "Fall Prevention Kits", including non-slip carpet tape, a nightlight, and a flashlight, will supplement this message. The kits will be available at presentations slated for Fall Prevention Month in November at the county's senior centers.

The health department is addressing the problem of suicides in conjunction with the Mental Health Authority of St. Mary's and Walden Sierra, Inc. Health Department records show a spike in the number of suicides in the County in recent years. "In the years 2003 and 2004 combined, there were 13 suicides in St. Mary's County. In 2005, there were 10 confirmed suicides," reported Reiney. "Approaching the data as a rising trend, it is the right time to provide education on mental health resources available in the county in order to prevent the trend from continuing".

An information campaign throughout the year will aim to increase awareness that suicide is a public health problem that is preventable, and remind people of resources, such as Walden Sierra's Crisis Hotline, that are available in St. Mary's County. That number, 301-863-6661, is

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a 24-hour gateway to crises intervention services. Reducing the stigma associated with seeking mental health services, and educating people about early and later signs of behaviors associated with suicide will also be addressed.

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