

Falls Prevention Awareness

My mother turned 70 this year. As I watch her grapple with worsening arthritis and limited mobility, I find myself paying more and more attention to statistics around aging and health. According to the [2016 America's Health Rankings Senior Report](#), Vermont is ranked second in the nation for the overall health of our older population. However, Vermont ranks 41st in the nation for the state's high rate of falls, with one in three older Vermonters reporting a fall every year. We all may fall throughout our lives, but the older we are, the greater the risk of health consequences. In fact, the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) state that falls are the leading cause of both fatal and non-fatal injuries among people aged 65 and older. Every 13 seconds an older adult in the United States is taken to the emergency room for a fall-related injury.

Falls are not only painful and traumatic, but they come at a great economic cost, to individuals, families and our entire healthcare system. New research in the [Journal of Safety Research](#) reveals that in 2015, the direct medical costs for non-fatal falls were over \$31 billion across the country. With a rapidly aging population - one-in-three Vermonters will be over 65 by 2030 – Vermont must address this challenge now if we hope to be prepared for the future.

The very good news is that the vast majority of falls are preventable. There is strong evidence that people will fall less often if they pay attention to some basic elements in their health and environment. For example, reviewing medications for side effects that could impact balance, getting regular vision and hearing checks, exercising regularly, and improving safety in the home can all make a big difference in reducing the risk of falling.

The Department of Disabilities, Aging and Independent Living (DAIL) believes that we can indeed reduce preventable falls across the state. The first step is increasing awareness and understanding. We are working together with Falls Free VT, a coalition of public and private partners across the state, to educate individuals, healthcare providers, and whole communities to help seniors take simple steps like those above. In addition, through the Older Americans Act that provides funding targeted to health promotion and disease prevention, DAIL provides support to Vermont's five Area Agencies on Aging for evidenced-based falls prevention programs.

Still, much more must be done if we are to bend the curve and change the story of falls in Vermont. Too many seniors are unaware of their risk, do not know what to do, and do not report when they fall. Too few healthcare providers screen for fall risks in their assessments with older patients. And too little funding is truly targeted toward prevention. September is *Falls Prevention Awareness Month*, an opportunity to elevate the important issue of falls, increase understanding of their impact, and advocate for more resources.

With the goal of raising awareness and inspiring action, Falls Free Vermont, in partnership with local communities, is coordinating free education sessions and individual falls screenings by certified screeners at various locations across the state. Once screened, Vermonters will be referred to more resources, such as local Tai Chi classes, which have proven to help reduce risk of falls through increased strength and balance.

Through my work at DAIL, I have learned that my own mother faces a growing risk for a fall. As she gets out and about less, her risk increases as her strength deteriorates. I'm doing my best to gently support her and lessen her risk with healthy choices, beginning with a screening. Do you know an older adult who may be at risk for a fall? Do you know the risks and what should you do? Are you aware of the resources available in your community that can help older adults stay healthy and maintain good balance and strength?

Find more information about September screening dates and locations across the state as well as exercise classes to lower risk at the [Center on Aging](#) or by calling the statewide Senior HelpLine at 1-800-642-5119.

Angela Smith-Dieng, Burlington, VT
802-241-0309; angela.smith-dieng@vermont.gov

Angela Smith-Dieng is the Director of the State Unit on Aging in the Adult Services Division at the Vermont Department of Disabilities, Aging and Independent Living, which oversees the Older Americans Act work throughout Vermont, with a vision that every Vermonter deserves to grow old with dignity, respect and independence.