

~ Support Services ~

Fall Prevention

This article is the fifth in a series on innovative and promising practices that expand upon six domains featured in our recent publication, "A Healthy Community Perspective on Aging Well." The domains are: Varied Housing Options, Transportation, Community Involvement, Employment, Lifelong Learning, and Support Services.

What do Beyonce Knowles, Paula Abdul, Kurt Vonnegut, Ed McMahon, Nancy Reagan, Supreme Court Justice John Roberts, Queen Mother of England, and Robert Atkins all have in common? All have fallen and sustained injuries. Everyone falls down and falls are not just limited to older adults.¹

With successful prevention strategies, many individuals are able to avoid falls. The most promising fall prevention strategies include physical activity and exercises that emphasize strength and balance. Receiving a medical fall risk assessment that includes a review and management of medications, visiting the eye doctor, and making home modifications to reduce tripping hazards are also key components in reducing falls.

Within the community, there are also fall risk factors. These include a broad range of environmental hazards and obstacles, such as cracks in sidewalks, steep curbs and steps at transit stops, and the lack of supportive features, such as inadequate lighting or the lack of places to sit or hand rails to help keep one's balance in stairways.

Taking Action Against Falls

Public officials such as community and transportation planners, community service providers, and those responsible for maintenance and repairs, should be aware of, and actively promote, community environments that lower the risk of falls.²

"Hazards related to the built environment include poorly maintained buildings; a lack of safety features such as handrails, grab bars, curb cuts, and ramps; and inadequate lighting or glare from surfaces. Outdoor community hazards include uneven pavement or surfaces, pavement cracks, tree roots, slippery walking surfaces, obstacles in walkways, uneven steps, unsafe stair design and poor lighting."³ According to Dr. Jon Pynoos, Professor of Gerontology at USC Andrus Gerontology Center, "such problems can be related to poor enforcement of codes or safety regulations as well as inadequate building codes."⁵

Fall Prevention Technical Assistance

In California, the Fall Prevention Center of Excellence (FPCE) received a grant from the Archstone Foundation as principal developer of California's fall prevention infrastructure. The FPCE is a consortium of five academic and public health organizations including the California Department of Public Health, State and Local Injury Control Section. The FPCE provides technical assistance to ten California-based fall prevention coalitions that work in their local areas to conduct needs

assessments, develop strategic plans, and carry out activities that increase interest in fall prevention.

Community-Based Fall Prevention Programs

Several community-based fall prevention programs exist in California. MarinOnTheMove.Org is a collaboration of organizations and individuals whose mission is to promote physical activity and healthy nutritional choices for Marin residents. The Irvine City Council developed a voluntary Universal Design program where participating homebuilders offer universal design features in new housing.⁶

The San Francisco Community and Home Injury Prevention Program for Seniors (CHIPPS) provides fall prevention information through presentations, workshops, home assessments and minor home modifications for older adults in the city.⁷ City leaders in Northridge, located in Los Angeles County, declared the nation's first "fall-free zone, as in: no falling down here."⁸ Other counties such as San Diego, San Mateo, Sonoma, Butte and countless others have created task forces focusing on fall prevention.⁹



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Falling is one of the greatest threats to an older person's independence. More than 40 percent of those who suffer a serious injury cannot return home and must live out their days in a nursing home.

- *Falls typically occur with everyday activities, with a simple misstep, tripping, or pivoting too fast.*
- *Between 20 and 30% of those who fall will suffer moderate to severe injuries such as bruises, fractures, or head traumas.¹¹*
- *55% of fall injuries among older people occur inside the house.¹²*
- *23% occur outside but near the house.¹³*
- *22% occur [in the community] away from the home.¹⁴*

Fall Prevention Resources

www.stopfalls.org. *Information about fall prevention efforts in California can be found on the Fall Prevention Center of Excellence (FPCE) website. The FPCE Brief "Multifactorial and Physical Activity Programs for Fall Prevention" identifies six multifactorial community-based programs and eight physical activity programs for fall prevention. The programs and activities are based on or adapted from empirical research. The array of choices presented provides enough diversity to fit differing needs within the community.¹⁰ According to the FPCE, these activities "hold great promise for adoption by community centers, senior housing, and other settings."*

www.marinonthemove.org. *Sponsored by the Marin County Department of Health and Human Services, the website provides a listing from A to Z of physical activities.*

www.ci.irvine.ca.us/depts/cd/buildingsafety/accessibility_universal_design.asp. *The City of Irvine Universal Design program offers a checklist for new homebuyers and builders.*

www.opha.on.ca/resources/falls.pdf. *Prevention of Falls in the Elderly Population is a booklet on the role of the community in fall prevention.*

Specific Areas Where Municipalities Can Make a Difference Include³:

- *Promoting fall prevention education in various settings, including community centers and libraries.*
- *Promoting walking programs.*
- *Adopting universal design policies.*
- *Supporting local wellness programs.*
- *Ensuring sidewalks are maintained, steps are even, and handrails are available.*
- *Allowing adequate time for pedestrians at street crossings.*
- *Convening a workgroup to focus on policy recommendations.*
- *Conducting a comprehensive assessment/audit of community hazards.*
- *Using focus groups to obtain their recommendations for promoting community-based fall prevention activities.*
- *Developing and widely disseminating fall prevention resources to business owners.*

¹Famous Fallers. Retrieved December 12, 2007, from Fall Prevention Center of Excellence Web site: http://www.stopfalls.org/basics/famous_fallers.shtml

²National Council on Aging. (2005). *Falls Free: Promoting a National Falls Prevention Action Plan*

³List adapted from Cicero, MSW, MPL, C. *Preventing Outdoor Falls*. Retrieved December 12, 2007 from Fall Prevention Center of Excellence Web site: http://www.stopfalls.org/grantees_info/files/PreventingOutdoorFalls-Cicero.pdf

⁴Scott VJ, Peck SHS, Kendall PRW. *Prevention of falls and injuries among the elderly: A special report from the office of the provincial health officer. Office of the Provincial Officer, British Columbia*

Ministry of Health Planning, 2004.

⁵National Council on Aging. (2005). *Falls Free: Promoting a National Falls Prevention Action Plan. The Role of the Environment in Fall Prevention at Home and in the Community*, pp 41-54. Washington, DC: Center for Healthy Aging.

⁶City of Irvine, *Accessibility/Universal Design*. Retrieved December 17, 2007, from City of Irvine Website Web site: http://www.ci.irvine.ca.us/depts/cd/buildingsafety/accessibility_universal_design.asp

⁷San Francisco Dept. of Public Health. (2007, November 13). *Seniors-CHIPPS*. Retrieved December 17, 2007, from San Francisco Dept. of Public Health Web site:

<http://www.dph.sf.ca.us/php/chipps.htm>

⁸Bartholomew, D. *Northridge takes stand against falls in senior population*. (2007, Nov. 10). *Dailynews.com*.

⁹2007 Fall Prevention Summit.

¹⁰Cicero, MSW, MPL, C., & Steinman, MS, B. *Multifactorial and Physical Activity Programs for Fall Prevention*. Fall Prevention Center of Excellence.

¹¹Nishita, PhD., C., & Choi, M.I.P.A., I. *Profile of CA Falls*. Fall Prevention Center of Excellence.

¹²National Health Interview Survey, 1997-1998. Accessed from <http://www.stopfalls.org/FAQ.shtml>.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.