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Support services essential for elderly living alone

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A spokesman for the American Red Cross Southwestern Pennsylvania Chapter said an elderly McKeesport woman is getting food, clothing and shelter assistance after fire destroyed her home.

The woman reportedly used candles to light and warm her residence as temperatures fell to 12 degrees.

McKeesport firefighters confirmed there was no heat or electrical service to the home along Ridge Street.

It also reportedly took the woman 40 minutes to find a phone to make a 911 call to report the fire because there was no phone service to her home.



Figure 1— Photo by Michael DiVittorio/Daily News

This is what remained of Patricia King's house at 923 Ridge St. in McKeesport after the initial Friday morning blaze and before firefighters had to return to the scene when it began to smolder again.

"Winter living alone really can be a double whammy, especially if you don't have any other kind of support system," said David J. Fetterman, director of the Center for Healthy Aging at the University of Pittsburgh. "There are a number of issues, particularly if someone does not have someone to look in on them." Fetterman said living alone can lead to depression, which in turn could trigger other health problems.

"Demands of home ownership can really become a burden for them," said Rachel Steigerwalt, program coordinator for Interfaith Volunteer Caregivers, a program of Family Services of Western Pennsylvania. "It never hurts to be a friendly neighbor." "Individuals should check on their elderly friends and relatives frequently during the cold weather," Southwestern Pennsylvania Red Cross chapter spokesman Brian Knavish said. "When possible, healthy individuals should assist older loved ones with errands and outdoor tasks to minimize the elderly individuals' exposure to the cold." Steigerwalt said parents could send over any kids who have too much energy or too much time on their hands.

"We have some simple ways that people can look after their neighbors," Steigerwalt said, "shoveling a couple extra squares of sidewalk or making sure the garbage is set out." On its Web site, Allegheny County Area Agency on Aging said it delivers space heaters to consumers without heat and follows up with referrals to its Protective Services.

"Protective Services ... are activities, resources and supports to detect, prevent, reduce or eliminate abuse, neglect including self-neglect, financial exploitation and abandonment of older adults," the county Web site said.

In a recent year, the Department of Human Services said there were 1,477 cases of need in Allegheny County.

The need has to be reported by "a person who suspects that an older adult is in need of intervention," DHS officials said. "Sometimes it's a neighbor, a relative or some other concerned individual." In Westmoreland County, the Area Agency on Aging offers an online questionnaire for reports of need. One can call Westmoreland's agency at 724-830-4444, while in Allegheny a 24-hour hotline is available at 412-350-6905 or, toll-free, 800-344-4319.

"Reporting of abuse or neglect can be anonymous," the Allegheny agency said.

During warmer months, Fetterman said, "you can at least go out on your porch, you can move on your own, or go out into the backyard, so there might be a greater likelihood of interaction." "It's a tricky scenario for us," Steigerwalt said. "Interfaith Volunteer Caregivers has a mission to help frail, older adults maximize their independence and overcome their isolation. We're not trained to evaluate if it is best for them." Many involved in IVC know the problems first hand.

"Most of our volunteers are senior citizens," Steigerwalt said, "but we're very flexible in how you can help and when it would be convenient for them to help." Red Cross has 804 volunteers 55 and over involved in the Retired & Senior Volunteer Program of Allegheny County.

They work with nearly 100 organizations.

Details are found on Red Cross activities in Allegheny County at *swpa.redcross.org* and at *www.westred.org* in Westmoreland County.

One can call the Southwestern Pennsylvania Chapter at 888-217-9599 and the Westmoreland County Chapter at

724-834-6510.

The Center for Healthy Living can be reached at 412-624-3217 or its www.healthyaging.pitt.edu Web site.

"One of the things we teach is maintaining socialization," Fetterman said. "The flip side is, avoiding isolation."

Interfaith Volunteer Caregivers is a network of 48 congregations. IVC has trained more than 450 volunteers to provide more than 9,500 hours of service each year to nearly 1,000 older adults.

"One service that we provide," Steigerwalt said, "(is) a safety program where we send volunteers out to walk room by room through the house with the individual to look for fire hazards and fall hazards." In addition to the inspection, individuals receive bath mats, flashlights and either new batteries for an existing smoke detector or, if it is too old or broken, a new smoke detector. One can contact IVC at 412-345-7420.

As a United Methodist pastor for some 20 years, Fetterman is aware of the role churches and other faith-based communities can play.

"Faith-based communities can really become more and more vigilant, not only to their own members, but to people who are living in the community alone and reaching out to them," he said.



Figure 2— Photo by Michael DiVittorio/Daily News

A blaze at a home at 923 Ridge St. in McKeesport began to smoulder again, as seen above, and firefighters were called back to the scene.

Fetterman suggested, "instead of having a class meeting or a committee meeting in a faith-based organization's offices, one can have it in someone's home." However, he stressed, "it all has to be done with some sensitivity." Steigerwalt suggested another tool that seniors can use, Lifeline, an emergency response program administered locally by St. Clair Hospital in the South Hills.

Through St. Clair Hospital, one can purchase the service, which provides subscribers with immediate assistance in the event of an emergency, in the form of a waterproof, lightweight personal help button that can be worn around the neck or on the wrist.

"Some even monitor if there is an unusual noise," Steigerwalt said. "They'll get on the speaker and ask if everything is OK." More information is available by calling 412-942-2093.

Staff Writer Michael DiVittorio contributed to this story.

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