

Local Partnership Is Helping Older Adults Address Fears of Falling



At a 2:30 pm graduation ceremony at Tripp Towers in the City's South End, the latest group of seniors completed the A Matter of Balance program and received their diplomas.

The program helps seniors who are at risk for falling by showing them how to overcome their fears of falling and continue to be physically active. The New Bedford Health Department, in partnership with the Greater New Bedford Community Health Center and Community Nurse and Hospice Care, received a Prevention Wellness Trust grant from the Massachusetts Department of Public Health to offer the specialized 8-week classes.

The classes, which have been underway for several months, will

continue to be offered at various locations throughout New Bedford on a regular basis in English, Spanish, and Portuguese over the next several years.

A Matter of Balance has been shown to reduce the fear of falling, increase mobility, and decrease the number of repeat falls among older adults who often avoid activities because they are afraid of falling. It is not an exercise program, but a program that focuses on giving older adults techniques to quell their fear of falling. Participants in the classes are led in interactive activities by a facilitator trained in falls prevention.

Many of those enrolled in the program are referred by medical care providers, but the program is also open to the general public. For example, the Greater New Bedford Community Health Center assesses falls risk in older adult patients and refers appropriate candidates to Community Nurse and Hospice Care. At the same time, bilingual community health workers work to encourage those in the program to stay committed to completing the eight-week course.

“People used to believe that falling was an inevitable part of aging and that little could be done to reduce falls risk,” says Jonathan Howland, director of the Injury Prevention Research at Boston Medical Center and consultant on the program, “but research has shown that falls risk can be reduced by community-based programs such as A Matter of Balance.”

Brenda Weis, Director of the New Bedford Health Department says, “A Matter of Balance offers a safe environment for seniors to learn techniques to avoid falling and to build confidence.”

She adds, “A key goal is to connect physicians with A Matter of Balance and other prevention and wellness programs in the community, so they refer their patients to these services, and

ultimately improve the health of our seniors. This is an unprecedented project. With the passing of the Affordable Care Act, we have seen a shift toward preventive programs and programs – such as A Matter of Balance – that empower individuals to take control of their health.”

Only eight other communities across the Commonwealth have been awarded Prevention Wellness Trust grants by the state. The partnership implementing the local grant is using the funds to also support preventive programs for pediatric asthma, hypertension, and substance abuse.

To learn more about the A Matter of Balance program, the public should contact Cristal Medeiros at Community Nurse and Hospice Care at 508-992-6278, ext. 2720.
