

New Jersey Jewish News

Staying safer in winter

by Laurie Loughney

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MetroWest CARES, the Committee Addressing Resources for Eldercare Services, is coordinated by United Jewish Communities with support from the Healthcare Foundation of New Jersey. CARES brings together professionals and lay leaders



from MetroWest agencies that provide services to older adults. Each month, a MetroWest CARES agency presents an educational column on an eldercare issue. This month's article on winter safety for seniors is presented by Laurie Loughney, chief operating officer of Jewish Community Housing Corporation, which owns and manages Lester Senior Housing, Jewish Federation Plaza, South Orange B'nai Brith Federation House, Village Apartments of the Jewish Federation in South Orange, and Jewish Federation Towers in Irvington.

If nothing else, the spate of recent snowstorms convinced many seniors and their families that winters in the Northeast can be particularly harsh for older people.

Many, in fact, remain homebound during much of the winter due to an inability to dig themselves out after a snowstorm or to navigate icy sidewalks or snow-filled roadways.

In addition, many worry about the expense and inconvenience of dealing with the additional headaches that come with living alone during the winter: high heating bills, few visitors, potential home repair problems, and cabin fever, among other issues.

In fact, we find that this is a time of year when many seniors and their families begin to think seriously about moving to a retirement community where meals, groceries, access to medical assistance, recreational activities, and — perhaps most of all — companionship are readily available.

Experts offer these winter safety precautions for seniors and their loved ones to consider:

- **Dress warmly.** When going outside, dress warmly in loose fitting clothes, layering whenever possible. Seniors should never venture out without wearing a hat, since as

much as 50 percent of one's body heat is lost through the head. Gloves should be worn to prevent frostbite and a scarf or mouth covering used to protect the lungs against cold air.

- **Keep hydrated.** Hydration is not only a concern during the summer. Even in the cold weather, seniors should continue to drink six to eight glasses of water daily.

- **Protect against falls.** This is the biggest concern for seniors, who are prone to falls because of reduced mobility and vision and to the potential for serious injury should they fall because of weakened bones. To protect against slipping outside, make sure shoes have a good rubber tread. If canes or walkers are used, make sure rubber tips are in good condition.

- **Set thermostat inside the home to at least 65 degrees.** Hypothermia is a far greater risk to older people. Plastic sheeting used to cover windows can help insulate the home and prevent against drafts. Make sure any heating problems are fixed expeditiously. Remain alerted to symptoms of hypothermia. Signs include drowsiness, slow or slurred speech, memory loss, disorientation, and a sense of exhaustion. If any of these symptoms become apparent, warm the victim gradually; have them change into warm, dry clothes; cover them with a blanket; and get medical attention promptly.

- **Keep smoke detectors in good working order.** This becomes especially important at a time of year when people are likely to use portable heating devices and fireplaces. Remember to replace batteries on a regular basis. Emergency devices should be readily available at all times.

- **Keep plenty of medicines, medication, and food on hand.** Since it is particularly difficult for seniors living alone to have access to supermarkets, pharmacies, or physicians during the winter, they should be well-stocked at all times with the necessities.

Winter is an especially difficult time for many seniors. Following these precautions can make these months safer and more comfortable.

Families and caregivers needing answers to broader eldercare questions and help with community resources can contact Elderlink, a portal to all MetroWest services for older adults and their families. Elderlink can be reached at 973-765-9050 or elderlink@jfsmetrowest.org. Visit Elderlink at www.elderlinkmetrowest.org.

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