

“Detecting the Invisible Killer” Information Program

Program Overview

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), adults age 65 and greater have the highest rate of death from carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning. With the population of our senior citizens increasing, the county’s Department of Community Services developed the “Detecting the Invisible Killer” information program that educates senior citizens of the sources of CO, symptoms of CO poisoning, and provides them with CO detectors for their homes.

Several sessions were held with senior citizens throughout the county. Those homebound seniors unable to attend a session were paid a home visit from program coordinators and had CO detectors installed in their homes.

To date, there have been no CO-related emergency calls received in our Emergency Communications Center.

The program was funded by a grant from the Virginia Department of Health, Division of Injury and Violence Prevention. While the formal information program has ended and there are currently no plans for sessions to be held, the program continues. The county was able to secure additional CO detectors from the Virginia Department of Health thereby making future in-home training sessions and detector installations available to seniors new to the community or those inadvertently missed in the original training program.

“Detecting the Invisible Killer” Information Program

Each year in America, carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning claims lives and sends thousand to hospital emergency rooms. Recent data from the Virginia Department of Fire Programs reports 20 CO incidents in York County. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), adults age 65 and greater have the highest rate of death from CO poisoning. This higher rate possibly is due to CO poisoning symptoms being mistaken for signs of aging. The county’s Department of Community Services developed the “Detecting the Invisible Killer” program to ensure that seniors residing in York County are protected from CO poisoning (also known as the invisible killer). The main objective of the program was to provide a CO poisoning informational campaign for our senior population and also arm them with CO detectors to ensure a safe living environment in their homes.

Carbon monoxide poisoning occurs after high levels of inhalation of the gas. Being colorless, odorless, tasteless and non-irritating, CO is very difficult for people to detect. Symptoms of mild acute poisoning include headaches, vertigo and flu-like effects; larger exposures can lead to significant damage to the central nervous system and heart, and even death. Chronic exposure to low levels of CO can lead to depression, confusion, and memory loss. Sadly, many seniors mistake these symptoms for other ailments and, as a result, some cases of CO poisoning remain untreated.

The program lasted approximately six months. Three presentations were held at the Senior Center of York with others being given at a local retirement community, a local church, a community park, and an area YMCA. Information on the dangers of CO poisoning and factors that contribute to CO poisoning was presented by the county’s

Public Safety Educator. Pre- and post-presentation surveys were given to participants to determine if there was a significant change to their knowledge of CO poisoning as a result of the information provided. At the conclusion of the training, CO detectors were distributed. Visits were made to homebound seniors with training provided and CO detectors installed in the home. All of the detectors were plug-in units with battery backup.

The county's Department of Community Services was awarded a grant of \$5,865 from the Virginia Department of Health, Division of Injury and Violence Prevention. This grant provided funds for marketing, printing, and purchasing the detectors. A team of York County staff from various departments provided the management and implementation of the project. York County Meals on Wheels provided referral for the majority of homebound seniors.

Carbon monoxide prevention information was presented to 133 senior citizens in a group format. In addition, 18 homebound seniors received the same training at their residences and had CO alarms installed in their homes. The results of the post-presentation surveys indicated that participants' knowledge of CO poisoning increased substantially.

Staff is monitoring the number of CO incidents in the county for a full calendar year since the program's completion (August 2010). Since the database of participants was provided to our Emergency Communications Center (9-1-1), staff will be alerted if a CO-related emergency call is received. Staff will document the total number of CO incidences, the number of incidences involving project participants, if the alarm detected

CO, or if the alarm had a false reading. (NOTE: To date, there have been no CO incidents.)

Although the grant period has ended, the opportunity for seniors to receive detectors and training still exists. The county was able to obtain additional detectors from the Virginia Department of Health. A public service announcement produced by the county's Video Services division is available for viewing on the county's Web site (www.yorkcounty.gov). The video covers materials presented at the formal trainings and provides contact information for seniors to request a CO detector if they were unable to attend a training session.