

# Medical packet aids quick emergency care for seniors

BY EMILIA ASKARI ♦ FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER ♦ January 11, 2009

When he makes an emergency medical call to a senior, Kris Marrs knows he's not likely to get the answers he needs to begin what could be lifesaving treatment.

"They forget to tell us important information -- surgeries, allergies," said Marrs, a firefighter/paramedic for West Bloomfield. "They panic. Or maybe they can't talk. So we have to go through medicine cabinets and refrigerators looking for clues as to what kind of medical problems they might have."

So in October, the department joined about 200 other Michigan communities to offer the File of Life -- a small red plastic packet that contains a form where residents outline their medical histories, current medications and insurance information. The packet hangs on refrigerators through an attached magnet so emergency medical workers can have easy access to it.

Westland, Allen Park and Richmond are among the communities that passed out the packets to thousands. The packets are offered free through some fire stations and senior centers.

And officials say they want more of the state's rapidly aging population to get the packets, since older people are more likely to need emergency medical help.

About 80% of the runs made by most fire departments are for medical emergencies. Of those runs, at least half involve elderly patients, Marrs estimates.

In 2008, there were about 1.2 million seniors age 55 and older in the state, according to the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments. SEMCOG predicts that number will grow to about 1.8 million in 2035. The state's anticipated spike is fueled by aging baby boomers and the high number of young residents leaving the state.

The packets also are recommended for those with chronic conditions.

"This File of Life tells us everything we need to know so we can concentrate on patient care rather than asking 100 different questions," Marrs said.

The Springfield, Mass.-based File of Life Foundation launched the File of Life in 1995 at the urging of some local Councils on Aging.

Since then, the foundation says it has sold more than 10 million packets to more than 6,500 communities nationally. The nonprofit foundation sells the files in bulk, with prices varying with the size of an order. The cost of each file is usually between \$1 and \$2.

The program has helped paramedics in thousands of emergency medical situations, fire officials estimate, though no one can say how many lives it may have helped save.

"It's extremely important. More people should be aware of it," Scott Lucas, emergency medical services coordinator for the Westland fire department, said Wednesday.

His department distributes the packets to its older residents.

Wayne County Sheriff Warren Evans is so enthusiastic about the File of Life that his deputies have distributed more than 43,000 packets in the past six years. His office has raised thousands of dollars from golf outings and other events to pay for the File of Life purchases.

"I'm a big fan of anything that gives seniors a little more safety or confidence or comfort," Evans said.

He's even willing to give a File of Life to those who live in other counties.

The moments saved by the File of Life are especially important in outlying communities like Richmond in northern Macomb County, where the nearest hospital is at least half an hour away.

"The faster we can get the patient on the way, the better," said Jeff White of Richmond Lenox Emergency Medical Service, which distributes about 800 File of Life packets each year. "When we can pull this magnet off of the refrigerator, that will save us five or 10 minutes."

Sometimes, he said, that's the difference between life and death.