

# Regional nursing program offers tune-ups between doctor visits



Regional public health nurse Lisa White does a wellness check on Rudy Swist of South Deerfield in the Deerfield Town Hall. – Recorder/Paul Franz

By CHRIS SHORES

Recorder Staff

Sunday, March 23, 2014 (Published in print: Monday, March 24, 2014)

GREENFIELD — Judy Ruggles first visited public health nurse Lisa White about 15 months ago, because she couldn't shake the feeling that something was off with her blood sugar.

Her blood sugar was fine, but the 63-year-old Deerfield resident's blood pressure was not. White immediately called Ruggles' primary care doctor, who was able to fit her in for an appointment the next day.

The visit was enough to head off the need for serious medication and Ruggles has been fine since. But she visits White's weekly walk-in clinics at the Deerfield Town Offices to get regular check-ups. She carries a red binder that White gave her, which she uses to log all of her medical information.

Ruggles is one of 178 clients who met with White for a combined 854 visits during 2013. Funded by a grant from Baystate Franklin Medical Center, White travels around the county helping adults manage their medications and monitor their chronic disease symptoms.

She has set up walk-in clinics in Charlemont, Conway, Deerfield and Shelburne, attempting to deliver services to clients who don't have a community-based nurse in their town. Those four towns — in addition to Buckland, Gill, Hawley, Leyden and Monroe — all receive nursing services through the county's regional health district, the Cooperative Public Health Service.

The \$25,000 grant from the hospital has allowed White to increase her time in these towns. She's also been able to provide clients with tools, like the "file of life" — a handy package of medical history and key contact numbers.

Clients can store all their information in an envelope that's attached to a refrigerator, in case first responders need to reference it. There's also a smaller version that can be stored in a wallet or purse when the client leaves the home.

She's also been able to set clients up with their own self-care checklists. Clients can monitor their chronic diseases by documenting symptoms and listing any questions they may want to ask their primary care doctor.

"They're feeling that they are more aware of how to manage their symptoms," said White. A person with congestive heart failure, for instance, regularly monitors weight to check for a sudden increase — which would raise a red flag that the person should seek medical attention from their doctor.

Gerald LeVitre, 70, said that since he began meeting with Lisa over two years ago, he's only missed one session. Just like how people routinely get their car looked at and tuned up, he said there's no reason not to do the same with your body between doctor appointments.

Baystate Franklin Medical, which has been working on a similar program to reduce unnecessary emergency room visits, awarded the grant in January 2013 as one of two public health projects in the county. The other, run by the Literacy Project, uses health literacy lessons to improve students' overall lifestyles.

"Chronic diseases — such as diabetes, heart disease and arthritis — can be difficult enough to manage, no matter who you are or where you live," said Amy Swisher, who co-chairs the hospital's community benefits advisory council. "We were drawn to this project for its focus on those living in some of Franklin County's more rural communities, particularly seniors."

White's clinics are all free with no appointment necessary. Anyone interested can stop by at:

- Charlemont Federated Church, from 10:30 a.m. to noon, on the second Tuesday of each month
- Conway Town Hall, from 9 a.m. to noon, on the first Friday of each month
- Deerfield Town Offices, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., on every Wednesday
- Shelburne Falls Senior Center, from 10:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., on the fourth Tuesday of each month

The Baystate Health system, which built a \$45 million emergency room in Springfield in 2012, is obligated by the state to give out \$2 million in grants toward community health programs. Baystate Franklin's slice of the pie is \$150,000 and the hospital's community benefits advisory council will soon request proposals for the next round in grant-funded public health projects.

While the hospital may choose to give additional funding to the current two projects, it could decide to target the money toward a specific public health issue, like the recent scourge of heroin addiction in Franklin County.

You can reach Chris Shores at: [cshores@recorder.com](mailto:cshores@recorder.com) or 413-772-0261, ext. 264