

ESSENTIAL training

First-responders receive 'insider' look into life with dementia

By **MARY OWEN**
BOOMER & SENIOR NEWS

Local first responders are becoming dementia-savvy, thanks to a unique training program through ComForCare.

"While we provide care for individuals of any age, seniors make up the bulk of our client base," says Lauren Heinatz, transitions director and trainer for the classes. "Age is one of the biggest risk factors for most types of dementia to develop. With our aging population and people living longer, we as a nation, including our local community, have reached a crisis point."

Heinatz says currently more than 5 million people are diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in the United States.

"That figure is expected to more than triple by 2050," she adds. "Alzheimer's is the number one cause of dementia. There are many other dementias such as Lewy Body, Vascular and Parkinson's disease with dementia."

Salem's ComForCare Home Care owner John Hughes takes this reality very



Courtesy photo

ComForCare caregiver Jennifer Robertson takes part in a role play for first-responders during a training to help them gain a better understanding of what it might be like for a person who has dementia.

seriously and believes first responders need specialized training to work effectively and quickly with people who have dementia, Heinatz says.

Hughes and Heinatz both became certified dementia instructors through the National Certification Board of Alzheimer's Care training program.

To date, approximately 12 EMTs for the Keizer Fire Department and 120 at the Salem Fire Department have been trained. Heinatz will provide training to Salem police officers and administrative staff from January to March.

ComForCare, a provider of private-duty home care, puts trainees through a Virtual De-

mentia Tour in which the participants put on gloves, wear goggles that have been blacked out to limit their visual field, and put popcorn kernels in their shoes.

"They are then given several tasks read in rapid fire to them, to complete in order and in a given amount of time," Heinatz says. "Things like

finding and putting on a small shirt and buttoning it, setting a dinner table, sorting socks and counting money. They are then lead into a dimly-lit room with very loud music playing which simulates what it's like to live with dementia to give them a greater understanding of the difficulties these people

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live with 24/7.”

She says most participants forget what some of the tasks are and the order in which they are to do them. A hint is posted in plain sight, but the letters of the words are scrambled making it impossible to decipher, just as understanding language is frequently difficult for someone living with dementia.

“People experiencing the Virtual Tour frequently feel more empathy for what it’s like to live with dementia,” she says. “It also gives an understanding for why a person with dementia must be approached differently. This gives us a concrete reference point to then teach specific communication techniques that will aid the responders in quickly gaining cooperation of a person with dementia. Seconds can mean the difference between life and death at times so this is very important.”

Just as important is that using these techniques will lessen the traumatic effects of a crisis situation for someone with dementia, she adds.

Heinatz says many of the first responders found the training to be enlightening and are eager to use the techniques learned in the class.

“One EMT said that he wished he had the training earlier as it would have helped on a call the day before,” she says.

William Giddings, the EMS training officer for the Salem Fire Department, believes the training is invaluable to the department’s firefighters.

“Just wanted to let you know the class was excellent,”



Courtesy photo

During a training, first-responders practice sorting and counting, but without their full vision or ability to have manual dexterity. This exercise simulates what it might be like for a person suffering the effects of dementia.

Capt. Shawn Barnes, a paramedic, told trainer Willy Giddings. “I feel as though this training should be utilized by other area facilities and senior housing. It could serve to provide better patient care and outcomes for those in need.”

Firefighter Timothy Pope says the most valuable lesson he learned from the class came from experiencing some of the difficulties that people with dementia face on a daily basis.

“I make sure I try to announce myself when entering, wearing a big smile, and making sure that I’m in their field of vision,” he says. “Keeping

the patient calm is always important, but after the class, I became more aware of how much of an impact that really makes.”

Pope calls the class “eye-opening,” and Salem Fire Department Capt. Ian Fitzgerald agrees.

“The information was really good and my crew and I talked about it afterwards,” Fitzgerald says. “The consensus was good training, and it gave us some new ideas on how to approach dementia patients with a little more thoughtfulness. One thing we are really good at is task level

jobs, not always being aware of the compassion side, so it’s a good reminder.”

Heinatz’s own story with dementia began with her mother-in-law, who died of Alzheimer’s.

“She and I were very close and walking down that path with her as her main caregiver was life-changing for me,” she says. “It was very frustrating as ‘I didn’t know what I didn’t know,’ and I had no idea what resources were out there.”

She says help was not forthcoming from those she was in contact with, including doctors and even memory care personnel.

“It was exhausting and frus-

trating to say the least,” says Heinatz, who chose a complete career change to work for ComForCare when Hughes approached her to come to work for him. “He opened the office with just the two of us in April 2012, and we have grown to a company of over 100 employees. The great thing is that he has a heart for those dealing with dementia because his mother died of Alzheimer’s.”

Heinatz says there is no higher calling for her than making a difference in the lives of others.

“It’s exciting to see the light go on and know that it means the quality of life of another human being is being enhanced,” she says. “In the case of working with families, I love to share that while living with dementia is never easy, it can be navigated successfully and awesome memories can be built along the way.”

ComForCare’s goal is to bring the training to churches for staff, volunteers and families within their congregation who have to deal with dementia on a daily basis, Heinatz says.

“The ultimate aim is to help family caregivers and hopefully to help some local churches set up free or low-cost adult day care centers so family members can get some much-needed respite,” she says. “Next on our goal list is to start training local business personnel to create a ‘dementia friendly’ atmosphere. We’d love to see restaurants and coffee bars get on board with this.”

“There is so much that can be done as a community to help this segment of our society,” she adds. “This is ComForCare Home Care’s way of giving back.”

For more information, call Heinatz at 503-400-6637. ■



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