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Help available for Hillsborough seniors during lonely holiday times



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By: Libby Baldwin

Five years ago, police found Katherine Fontina lying on the floor of her apartment, afraid and in pain. She had been there three days.

Fontina experienced the nightmare faced by many senior citizens living alone — a concern that reaches a peak during the holiday season.

"Everything you see on TV, from Christmas movies to Publix commercials, is all about people getting together," said Kristi Campbell, owner of the Brandon/Tampa branch of Home Instead, a nationwide in-home care agency. "Seniors who live alone see all of this warm and fuzzy and mentally check out. They stop taking medication, stop eating, and give up the will to live."

Fontina got help. Four days a week, the 80-year-old Seffner woman and Home Instead aide Jessica Pagan play games, walk around the neighborhood, and talk about life. Fontina is able to spend her days with friends at the Cornerstone Baptist Church or feeding the cardinals and doves that visit her sun-drenched patch of backyard.

She still drives to her doctor and to church.

"Knowing that she is coming helps me so much," Fontina said. "She does the things that I can't do anymore, and we really have a friendship."

One way seniors and families can tap into Home Instead or other resources right for them is the Eldercare Locator — a nationwide hotline whose annual "Home For The Holidays" campaign raises awareness about senior isolation.

Isolation affects an estimated one in five people over 50 and can be as harmful as 15 cigarettes a day, leading to higher rates of chronic depression, dementia and death, as well as theft or abuse, according to Eldercare.

"The fastest growing type of abuse is financial exploitation," said Patrice Earnest from Eldercare. "A predator sees a victim's isolation as the perfect opportunity to insinuate themselves into their life, pretend to be a friend, and learn about their assets in order to defraud them."

Said Campbell, "Pay attention to your elderly neighbors. Knock on the door and say hi. Get to know them enough to know their routine."

The Eldercare Locator receives almost 300,000 phone calls each year from seniors who crave social interaction.

"Our society is so focused on being independent; seniors are hesitant to ask for help," said Dr. Rahul Mehra, a psychologist based in Indian Rocks Beach.

They also can be reluctant to report abuse for fear they'll have to leave their homes, Campbell said.

Today, more adults are living alone and for longer — especially in Florida.

"Generations ago, everyone stayed close to home," Campbell said. "Now we're experiencing more split homes and multi-generational families spread all over the place."

During the difficult holiday season, Campbell coordinates the "Be A Santa To A Senior" program, which places trees in Hillsborough county stores — including Shapes fitness and Famous Tate — where shoppers can select an ornament listing gifts for seniors who have little or no family.

Campbell buys the trees with her own money. Volunteers spend two weeks in December putting the packages together, and Americare ambulances deliver them to senior centers. This year, about 875 seniors will receive new clothes, games, makeup, word puzzles and toiletries.

"We keep it anonymous so people are doing it for the right reasons," she said. "Even if the seniors don't make it through another winter, they're leaving for their next life with a smile."

Fontina, whose tidy home is decorated for Christmas, said she believes in "living in the moment" and focusing on her blessings.

"I think it's up to the seniors themselves," she says. "You can't just sit back and have a pity party or watch TV for the rest of your life. You're still part of the world."