



Caring for the Community with Wintergreen Fire & Rescue

Supported by a Sentara Cares grant, Wintergreen Fire & Rescue in Nelson County is launching the first community paramedicine program in the Blue Ridge Health District.

“Nelson County has a gap in care below the 911 level,” says Curtis Sheets, chief of Wintergreen Fire & Rescue. “People are calling 911 because they have nowhere else to go.”

The 100-member Wintergreen Fire & Rescue team provides fire suppression and emergency medical services (EMS) to an area encompassing roughly 15,000 people spread out across hundreds of square miles.

Nelson County’s residents are relatively isolated geographically, and many of them also face severe financial hardship — in fact, the county has the lowest median household income in the Blue Ridge Health District. At least 17% of Nelson’s children live in poverty, and half qualify for free lunches.

As a result, strong preventive and primary care are out of reach for many Nelson County families. Wintergreen Fire & Rescue helps to bridge this gap, fielding nonemergency calls and taking people to the hospital for issues, such as infected wounds and diabetes complications, that could have been avoided through preventive care.

Inspired by the need and the opportunity, Chief Sheets and Deputy Chief Mike Riddle are stepping forward to launch a Nelson County community

paramedicine program, supported by a core group of dedicated volunteers, as well as leadership funding from a Sentara Cares grant from Sentara Martha Jefferson Hospital.

“This is a great opportunity to be really attentive to the physical and mental health needs of the community,” says Ron Culberson, a social worker and one of the volunteers helping to build the program.

For Sentara Martha Jefferson Hospital, supporting the program aligns perfectly with our commitment to improving access to care and addressing the social determinants of health identified through our local Community Health Needs Assessment.

Community paramedicine focuses on prevention and wellness, which could mean removing fall risks, connecting patients with services and care networks, helping them manage chronic conditions, securing affordable medications, or just helping people adjust to changes after a hospital stay. Community paramedics also help people manage barriers to health, such as food insecurity, lack of affordable housing and substance use disorders.

The need for and potential benefits of the program are significant: Nelson County residents have hospitalization rates and cancer deaths that are among the



highest in the region. The county also has the highest suicide rates in the Blue Ridge Health District.

“We’ve had people who have called us hundreds of times in a year because they didn’t have anyone else to help,” says Sheets. “But if you send someone to check on them, you find EMS calls go down to zero. Loneliness is one of the top problems.”

Of Wintergreen’s more than 2,500 EMS calls every year, Sheets estimates that about 10% could be paramedicine candidates. The program will focus on the most at-risk people: “frequent flyers” who make repeated use of nonemergency 911 services throughout the year, have recently been discharged from the hospital or are struggling to manage a chronic illness.

To identify the people most in need of support, the EMS team is working with local hospitals and medical partners, faith-based institutions, and local organizations while doing their own outreach.

“It’s a ‘build it and they will come’ approach,” says Wayne Hachey, a retired U.S. Army doctor and public health advocate who is also part of the core volunteer team.

It helps that Wintergreen’s emergency medical technicians (EMTs) and firefighters are known and

“
*Community
paramedicine
programs allow
EMTs to focus
on prevention
and wellness.*
”

trusted in the community, thanks in part to their prior investment in vaccine clinics and other community events. Sheets is a second-generation firefighter and EMT with more than 20 years of experience. Riddle is a 15-year Wintergreen veteran, and Hachey and Culberson have strong volunteer EMT experience, in addition to their professional expertise.

“On the volunteer side, we’re unique in that we are primarily a group of retirees who have asked to be in on the ground floor, so we can help to make this paramedicine program all it can be,” says Hachey.

Wintergreen launched the program this summer with two dedicated part-time staff and a vehicle donated by the Grottoes Rescue Squad. Through a Community Paramedicine Task Force convened by the Blue Ridge Health District, the Nelson County team is learning from the success of EMS peers in Harrisonburg, Lynchburg, Richmond

and other communities with paramedicine programs already in place.

While paramedicine programs have demonstrated reductions in preventable emergency department visits and hospital readmission rates, the most important metric of success for the program will be the improved health of people in Nelson County.

Wintergreen Fire & Rescue prides itself on being innovative in finding ways to care for the community. “That’s true with the types of equipment we use and the protocols we have in place,” says Riddle. “Community paramedicine is one more tool in our toolbox. We are grateful to Sentara Martha Jefferson Hospital for supporting our efforts to improve health and wellness in our community.”

➔ Learn more at mjhfoundation.org or wtgfiresq.org.