MAKING FALL PREVENTION A PRIORITY

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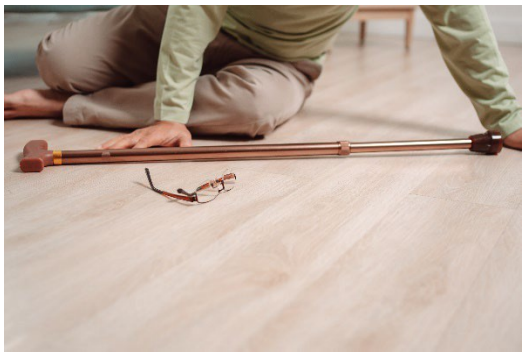

For older adults, falls are the leading cause of injury-related hospitalizations and deaths.[1]

The National Challenge

Unintentional falls threaten the safety and independence of older adults and increase the cost burden to society, the individuals, and their families, especially as they are the leading cause of injury and death among individuals aged 65 and older.[1] In 2024, 48,308 persons in this age group in the United States died from injuries sustained from unintentional falls.[2] Financially, this totaled $1.85 billion in medical costs, with the average medical expense totaling $38,359.[2] The value of statistical life costs (monetary estimate of the collective value placed on mortality risk reduction) totaled $193.23 billion, for an average of $4 million per deceased individual.[2] In that same year, 4,502,954 adults aged 65 or older across the United States were treated and released from emergency departments for unintentional nonfatal fall injuries.[3]

The Challenge in Kentucky

Older Kentuckians reported a higher prevalence of fair or poor health than Kentuckians of other ages.[4]

Falls are increasing across the Commonwealth, affecting more older adults than in previous years. In 2024, 415 Kentuckians aged 65 or older died because of a fall-related injury,[5] an increase from the previous year's 359 deaths.[6] Moreover, in 2024 there were 57,138 fall-related visits to Kentucky emergency departments[7], an increase from the prior year[8]. Additionally, there were 9,728 fall-related inpatient hospitalizations in acute care facilities among Kentucky residents aged 65 years and older in 2024,[9] an increase as well from 2023[10].

Risk Factors and Responding to the Challenge

With advancing age, individuals may experience physiological changes, such as declining vision and hearing, loss of muscle mass, muscle weakness, gait and balance deficits, and slowed reaction times. Aging also can contribute to the development of medical conditions, including diabetes, high blood pressure, and other disorders that require treatment with multiple medications; interactions between some medications can increase the risk of falling. Osteoporosis, which affects 27.1% of females aged 65 and above and 5.7% of men in the same age group[11], increases one's risk of falling and fall-related injuries.[12] All of these factors, as well as living in an unsafe environment, can put

older adults at an increased risk of falling.

Falls can have a devastating impact on the physical, emotional, and financial health of a person as well as their family, caregivers, and society. The effects of falls can be short-term, limiting activities for a few days, or long-term, resulting in a permanent disability, loss of independence, or death.

Falls are **NOT** an inevitable part of aging. The incidence of falls among older adults can be reduced through evidence-based interventions such as Bingocize®, Matter of Balance, Tai Chi for Arthritis, Stepping On, Healthy Steps in Motion; by practical lifestyle adjustments; and with increased fall prevention awareness by national and community partnerships.

The Kentucky Safe Aging Coalition

In June of 2008, after reviewing Kentucky injury data, the Kentucky Safety and Prevention Alignment Network (KSPAN), the state injury community planning group, hosted a symposium to address falls among older people. Symposium attendees included fall prevention advocates from state and local public health departments, health care (e.g., hospital trauma centers, extended care facilities), area development districts, county extension offices, numerous state and local agencies, health insurance companies, and other private organizations with an interest in older adult injury

prevention. Attendees established that KSPAN would coordinate a statewide fall prevention coalition. In October 2008, the new fall prevention coalition, the Kentucky Safe Aging Coalition (KSAC), held its first meeting.

Today, KSAC remains focused on decreasing the incidence of older adult falls and has expanded its mission to include the prevention of multiple types of injuries impacting older Kentuckians. The coalition receives funding support from the Kentucky Department for Public Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Core State Injury Prevention Program (Kentucky Violence and Injury Prevention Program). KSAC works with communities across the Commonwealth to develop new coalitions. KSAC is a member of the national Falls Free™ Coalition sponsored by the National Council on Aging (NCOA) and serves as a link to national resources available to the local coalitions.

Fall Prevention in Kentucky

As part of Kentucky's efforts to decrease the incidence of older adult falls, KSAC and the Kentucky Department for Public Health host an annual **Falls and Osteoporosis Summit**. At this event, members of local fall coalitions and other health care and injury prevention professionals gather to learn from experts in the field. The summit is also an opportunity for attendees to share their success stories and best practices and network with other fall prevention enthusiasts.

Historically, Kentucky (through KSAC) has joined other states in celebrating **National Fall Prevention Awareness Day** on the first day of fall. As part of the observance, the governor of Kentucky issues a proclamation declaring Fall Prevention Awareness Day. Due to the magnitude of the need to prevent falls, this one-day event has transitioned into **Fall Prevention Awareness Week** in Kentucky. KSAC works with coalitions from across the nation to develop Fall Prevention Awareness Week resources and the annual NCOA Falls Free Fall Prevention Awareness Week Impact Report. During the week-long campaign, local coalitions and other organizations host events to increase awareness of fall prevention in their communities, increase access to fall prevention resources, use tools to assess fall risk factors, and learn about local evidence-based fall prevention interventions. KSAC provides support for these activities by attending these local events, speaking on fall prevention, educating on evidence-based prevention strategies, and making fall prevention materials available for distribution.

The following KSAC-developed fall prevention products are being distributed to the coalition: "*Falls at Home: A Checklist for Prevention*", "*Osteoporosis and Falls*" handout, and a "*Prevent Falls at Home*" magnet to help remind older adults and caregivers of some immediate efforts that can be taken to mitigate fall risk and the importance of osteoporosis screening. KSAC distributed a survey across the state to assess fall prevention capacity; findings are linked here. KSAC also promotes evidence-based fall prevention programs and other resources (i.e., assisted living devices, such as night lights, canes, and walkers) across the network.

The Kentucky Injury Prevention and Research Center's Kentucky Violence and Injury Prevention Program, as bona fide agent for the Kentucky Department for Public Health in injury prevention, provides fall-related data via www.safekentucky.org and ad hoc data reports. State-and local-level fall-related injury data are an important tool to help increase awareness about the burden that fall injuries place on individuals, their families, and our health care system and are useful for helping prioritize and mobilize fall prevention efforts for older Kentuckians.

Summary

Kentucky is working to reduce older adult falls, but more work needs to be done! This can only be achieved through partner and local community involvement across the Commonwealth. Falls have a devastating impact on our loved ones, families, communities, and health care system. It is imperative that evidence-based interventions and other educational programs are made available and accessible to all Kentucky older adults and that support is provided for the sustainability of fall prevention programs.

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