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F.R.E.E. lends assistance to area patients

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The Winchester Star

Winchester — Closets, basements, and garages can become home to wheelchairs, walkers, and other medical-assistance devices no longer needed by their owners.



Volunteer Deborah Marr checks the inventory of walkers Friday at the Northern Shenandoah Valley Foundation for Rehabilitation Equipment and Endowment at 333 W. Cork St. (Photo by Ginger Perry)

But the Northern Shenandoah Valley Foundation for Rehabilitation Equipment and Endowment at 333 W. Cork St. wants to put those unused items to work for people in need.

The nonprofit organization comprised of nearly 30 volunteers collects “gently used” medical-assistance equipment to pass along to others.

“We see a lot of people who don’t have [any] insurance, or don’t have insurance that will cover everything they need,” said Stephanie Mahan, president of the local F.R.E.E. “It

also keeps waste out of the landfill and is a better use of our financial resources.”

Mahan’s group is part of a statewide effort to ensure that all residents have access to the medical equipment they need.

Virginia is one of 12 states that received a three-year grant in 2006 from the U.S. Department of Education’s Rehabilitation Services Administration to develop assistive technology reuse programs for people who cannot afford medical-assistance devices.

Seven F.R.E.E. chapters have been established in in the state.

The Winchester group began distributing items in July. It serves people in the city and Frederick, Clarke, Loudoun, Fauquier, and Shenandoah counties, as well as portions of West Virginia and Maryland.

From July to December, Northern Shenandoah Valley F.R.E.E. provided 42 people with 89 devices. Recycling the medical equipment saved \$10,000 in Medicare, Medicaid, and insurance claims, officials said.

Heart transplant recipient Michael McKiernan, 48, is one area resident who received assistance from F.R.E.E.

He realized he needed an extended bathtub bench and a raised toilet seat to help him at home. He also received a brace for his right leg in October, and still uses it when driving.

“Because I had the transplant and had home health care, they were really nice to help us out,” McKiernan said during a phone interview Friday. “They knew I needed these things and agreed to help me.”

The Valley chapter of F.R.E.E. has given equipment to clients ranging from their 20s to their 70s, Mahan said.

All the equipment is inspected and sanitized before being organized in a storage room at the Cork Street site.

Prior to receiving any equipment, each potential client must fill out an application explaining a medical need, proof of financial need, and a doctor’s prescription for the materials.

About 75 percent of people who apply receive some form of the item they request, Mahan said. “Most of the time when we have to turn someone down, it’s because we don’t have [the equipment].”

One popular request that Mahan must turn down is hospital beds. The Foundation for Rehabilitation Equipment and Endowment does not collect or distribute the beds because of space issues.

But many other assistance devices are available.

In August, McKiernan received his two bathroom items.

He has already returned the bench, and as he continues his recovery, he plans to give the toilet seat back soon.

McKiernan said he has no planned return date for the leg brace, though.

A month after clients receive the equipment, Mahan or another volunteer with F.R.E.E. calls them to see how they are doing with the items.

“By following up with everyone, we can see the impact on the community,” she.

Most of the equipment is used by clients for a few months before being returned — then it is sanitized and given to another qualified client.

For more information about, or to obtain an application from, the Northern Shenandoah Valley Foundation for Rehabilitation Equipment and Endowment, call Stephanie Mahan at 540-664-7552.