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First-responders, Edgewood pair up for dementia training

By Zoe Mathews zmathews@eagletribune.com Apr 21, 2019



TIM JEAN/Staff photo Maribeth Cote from the Edgewood Retirement Community speaks with first-responders in the North Andover Fire Department's training room about dealing sensitively with dementia patients. 4/9/19

Tim Jean



NORTH ANDOVER — Would you know what to do if you came across someone who couldn't tell you their name or where they came from? What if it was an emergency situation?

Recently, North Andover firefighters sat down with representatives from Edgewood Retirement Community to learn how to navigate the waters of responding to calls to assist people with Alzheimer's or dementia.

During emergencies, stress is at an all-time high, and certified dementia practitioner Maribeth Cote said first-responders should be the calming force.

"They may have been a doctor, a school teacher — they were someone else in their lives before this disease," she said, urging firefighters to respond with respect and not be dismissive of patients' needs.

About 5.5 million people in America have Alzheimer's, according to data from the Alzheimer's Association. The disease, along with dementia, is associated with aging.

The brain stops "telling you to eat, or speak, it's not telling them I'm in a wheelchair, I can't walk," Cote said.

Cote passed around two weights, one 3-pound and one 1-pound. They were meant to demonstrate just how much Alzheimer's and dementia affect the brain's activity.

"But one thing you never lose is your sense of emotion," she said.

Edgewood has a variety of senior living arrangements in North Andover, including senior apartments, cottage homes and a new facility specifically designed for people who need memory support, called Woodlands Inn, which is in the process of becoming a certified assisted living residence.

"(Our first-responders) have to understand and remember it takes a personal touch," said Jeff Deschenes, EMS education and training officer with the North Andover Fire Department. "These people still have emotions, we have to remember that."

Cote recommended first-responders maintain eye contact, a simple gesture that often gets overlooked.

"Get down to their level if they're in a wheelchair ... don't ever just come up from behind them and start pushing them," she said. "And break down communication into three or four words at a time, and one-step directions."

Fire Chief William McCarthy said when Edgewood reached out to the department to coordinate the training, he was all in.

"We respond there on a regular basis, it's about being community partners," said McCarthy.

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