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A Lifeline to Help

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This is Lifeline. We have a medical alert call from Emma Fallo. She is having chest pains. We are dispatching an ambulance," said the voice on the other end of the line. The call came from Philips Lifeline, a nationwide personal emergency response system provided locally to persons of all faiths by Jewish Family Service of Greater New Orleans.

It was just after midnight Jan. 2, 2011, and Mary Langley was jarred from her sleep by the call. She quickly dressed and raced to her 88-year-old mother's house less than 10 minutes away. After quickly letting herself in, she found her mother sitting on the side of her bed in obvious distress.

"I'm feeling bad. I have this chest pain and I'm very short of breath. It woke me up. I felt too bad to call you, so I just pressed the button," said Emma Fallo, her mother and patriarch of a Westbank family that includes six grandchildren and five great-grandchildren. The story is real, but both women asked me to use assumed names, as Fallo still lives alone at age 88.

Fallo's phone rang within moments of her daughter's arrival. It was Lifeline calling to assure both women that an ambulance was on its way. Just as Langley thanked and said goodbye to Lifeline, the doorbell rang. Paramedics from the West Jefferson Medical Center Emergency Medical Services, the agency that responds to most emergency requests from the West Bank of Jefferson Parish, quickly transported Fallo to the hospital.

She arrived at the busy and always-bustling West Jefferson emergency room whose doors have never closed. The emergency room personnel assumed care when Fallo rolled in on the gurney. After checking vital signs, the staff ordered an EKG and drew blood tests to do what is called "rule out a myocardial infarction" in medical parlance.

The preliminary testing didn't reveal any problems to explain her symptoms. Her pacemaker, installed last July after her pulse fell dangerously low, was functioning well. The emergency room contacted her physician who asked that she be admitted for observation. Off she went to a room with an intravenous line in her arm, oxygen tongs in her nose and telemetry pads attached to her chest beaming every single heart beat to a nearby nursing station.

Additional tests the next day confirmed the absence of any heart attack or clots in her lungs. Her cardiologist told the family all looked well although he couldn't explain what had caused her distress. The answer came later. The telemetry alarm monitoring her heart signaled that something was amiss. Her heart rate, normally an irregular atrial fibrillation (not too slow any more thanks to the pacemaker but not too fast either) had soared to over 140. The nurse quickly did a bedside assessment. Her initial symptoms had returned – chest discomfort and shortness of breath.

The culprit once again was her heart's electrical conduction system. Last summer electrical impulses from specialized conduction cells dangerously slowed decreasing the blood supply to Fallo's brain and causing her to faint suddenly several times before her physicians inserted a pacemaker. This permanent pacemaker kept slowdowns from happening again, but now her conduction system would all of a sudden sputter out impulses like a machine gun. These excess impulses overwhelmed the ability of her heart chambers to pump oxygenated blood causing sudden sensations of chest pain and shortness of breath until the rate spontaneously returned to normal.

Fallo's physician prescribed a beta-blocker twice daily that erased these episodic and chaotic electrical signals.

After a couple of convalescent weeks at her daughter's home, Fallo was clambering to return home, and she did. The older one gets, the more one appreciates one's own bed. And her bed is in a meticulously clean and uncluttered home built of cypress. She and her deceased husband moved there in 1946. Her enclave includes neighbors on the block who also have also lived there for more than 50 years. It is an old neighborhood of sturdily built houses with well-kept yards and crawfish boiling pots stored in carpports. As I stood on her porch immersed in Creole farewells, the Westbank Expressway was visible in the distance.

Locally the Lifeline franchise is run by the nonprofit Jewish Family Services of Greater New Orleans. Subscribers to this program have near instant access to a highly trained person at the push of a button. A newer enhanced upgrade of this device automatically places a call for help even without pressing the button if a motion sensor detects a fast change of position consistent with a fall.

"Lifeline has some 800,000 subscribers nationally. We currently have 650 subscribers in this area and are adding 25 to 30 a month," says Marilyn Kline, the project manager at Jewish Family Services. "We have volunteers who call each subscribers monthly reminding them to test the help button and just say hello. We try to make it a really personal service."

"I call it my Jewish necklace," says Jon Newlin, a writer and subscriber who isn't fully mobile due to injuries received after Hurricane Katrina. "I slipped out of bed once and landed on the floor. I pushed the button, and they sent some really cute firemen who put me back in bed."

Bottom line: Most folks prefer and cherish the independence and privacy of living at home. More and more elderly are living alone and a personal emergency response system such as Lifeline can provide comfort, security and peace of mind for the person home alone as well as for friends and relatives. In the event of a fall or other emergency, personalized help is just the push of a button away.

Philips Lifeline emergency response system in New Orleans

What equipment and devices are involved? The base station, half the size of a head of Johnny Becnel's cauliflower, includes a speakerphone attached to a telephone line usually in the bedroom. The help button, embedded in a water-proof pendant the size of two Palmetto bugs, is attached to an adjustable lightweight thick cord that hangs around the neck like a strand of Mardi Gras beads without the beads. The necklace, like Mormon underwear, is designed to be worn at all times and can be tucked underneath a blouse or shirt.

What happens when the help button is pressed? Within seconds the base unit dials the Lifeline Response Center and establishes a two-way voice communication over the speakerphone. The Lifeline operator has the member's profile of pre-selected numbers to call and quickly assesses the situation. Depending on the reply, the unit is reset or family and/or emergency response units are called. If the person is in a room away from the base station and no voice is heard, an emergency is assumed, specified family members or friends are notified by phone, and the local EMS number is called.

What if a person falls and is unable to press the help button? The pendant with AutoAlert System has a velocity device that senses a fall and automatically contacts the Response Center. I test dropped Fallo's pendent onto her carpeted floor, and the operator responded within about 45 seconds.

What do I need to make Lifeline Service operational? A phone or cable line and an electrical outlet close to the base unit. It cannot be connected to a cell phone. A lithium battery powers the help button, and it lasts for years. An alarm is activated on the base station when the pendant battery needs changing.

What happens when the electricity goes out? The Lifeline works as long as there is still a telephone dial tone. The base unit with the speakerphone has a constantly charging battery with a 24-hour plus backup capacity.

Wouldn't I be better off with a cell phone just for emergencies? No. A lightweight and easy to wear pendent with a radio activated help button is much more likely to be a your

constant companion than even the slickest and smallest cellphone. Many falls happen in the bathroom. Unlike cellphones, you can take a bath with your waterproof Lifeline pendant. In addition it is simpler to use with only one large button to press and there is no downtime for recharging the battery. On the other hand, a supplemental cellphone might be indicated if your routine involves outside activities far removed physically from the base station.

How much does it cost? The monthly fee is \$37 plus an additional \$10 for the AutoAlert feature that detects falls. A sliding scale fee is available for persons with limited income. There is an initial charge of \$80 for an in-home setup or only \$30 if the equipment is picked up at Jewish Family Services in Metairie. "If you can plug in an answering machine, you can connect Lifeline," said Marilyn Kline, Lifeline Program Manager. To subscribe or for more information, call Kline at (504) 831-8475.