

From LA to La.

Elderly Katrina Evacuee Finds Better Health in Rebuilt Louisiana Home

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August 29th, 2005 -- Hurricane Katrina roars into New Orleans, forcing Ms. Leah Landry*, an 85-year-old with diabetes, to evacuate her apartment home in St. John Berchman's Manor. She made it out just in time. Just hours after all the residents fled the senior living facility on the east bank of the city, the London Avenue Canal waters flowed over their banks and began creeping into the building. Water rose inch by inch, hour by hour, until the entire first floor was flooded and the building almost destroyed.

It's a testament to the spirit and strength of hurricane recovery efforts in Louisiana that St. John Berchman's Manor, the site of Ms. Landry's greatest physical danger, became the center of her greatest health gains three short years later.

When Ms. Landry finally made it back into New Orleans from her exile in Los Angeles, St. John Berchman's Manor was still closed, but she was able to find temporary housing in a Jefferson Parish apartment building. eQHealth Solutions, the Medicare Quality Improvement Organization for Louisiana, was already there, offering no-charge diabetes health education classes in the communities where African-American seniors were resettling. Landry decided to attend an Every Diabetic Counts class hosted by eQHealth Solutions at her new residence. The EDC program is a free, diabetes self-management education program taught by health educators in easy to reach neighborhood locations for Medicare beneficiaries.

"I always thought of myself as a 'good diabetic' but the class really opened my eyes," Landry said. "Although I have done well controlling my diabetes, I had no idea what diabetes could do to my body and the tests I should be getting done regularly."

A month later, Landry was able to relocate to her pre-Katrina New Orleans apartment home in St. John Berchman's Manor. eQHealth Solutions had stretched its outreach efforts into this newly reopened senior living facility as well. Though she thought she had learned everything she needed to know in the EDC classes about living a healthy lifestyle with diabetes, she found unique health care education being offered in the Limb Preservation After Katrina (LiPAK) classes held in St. John Berchman's Manor.

LiPAK classes are designed to help prevent limb amputation in African-Americans with diabetes by teaching self-care and specialized screening techniques to those most at risk. Limb amputation is a diabetes complication that occurs more often in the African-American population in Louisiana. The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services feared that the problem might become worse with the health care resource shortages caused by Hurricane Katrina and funded this special outreach project to protect beneficiaries.

Landry immediately noticed something different about the LiPAK class.

“Ms. Simmons showed us a video about foot ulcers and had us take off our shoes and do self-foot examinations,” she said. “This is when I realized how serious neuropathy is.”

The following morning, Landry had an appointment with her primary care physician, Dr. Nicholas Angelica. She brought materials from the LiPAK class, including information to help her understand her A1C test results and a chart that provided ideal values for other laboratory results.

“I showed him the results of my self-foot examination then took my shoes off and asked him to check my feet. When he had my results from my lab work, I gave him the papers I brought and asked him to write the numbers on there. Now I understand how to read my results and I can compare my numbers to the ‘Ideal Values’ page in my book from class,” Landry said.

Landry said Dr. Angelica was impressed with the materials and questions she brought to the appointment, and asked her where she received all the information. “He said he had never had a patient ask him for that information before,” Landry said.

After her appointment, Landry attended the second day of the LiPAK class and shared her results with the class. She was delighted to show the class her healthy number using the chart in the materials.

The eQHealth Solutions education outreach to those living in the New Orleans senior living facilities that have been restored is helping the residents rebuild their self-confidence, as well. “I have a renewed sense of purpose about taking care of my feet and now I feel comfortable asking questions about my health to my Primary Care Physician and Podiatrist,” she said. “Now, I feel I’m living like a good diabetic.”

*Not real name

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