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Community paramedic program helps ER visits drop in Ada County

Credit: Karen Zatkulak

Thressa Smith is diabetic, and when her blood sugar dropped, her family had been calling 911. That's not happening anymore.

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BOISE -- A group of local paramedics has a new outlook on health care in Ada County.

Instead of responding to numerous 911 calls and costly emergencies, these

"community paramedics" are taking extra steps to prevent them.

They say it's working.

Ada County commissioners paid for the two year pilot program at a cost of about \$200,000. The program has been in effect for about a year, and involves a group of four paramedics from the Ada County Paramedics organization.

THE COMMUNITY PARAMEDICS

Instead of transporting patients to the emergency room, the community paramedics bring their services to the patient's home. They say it's all about preventing more serious health scares. Instead of an ambulance, these paramedics drive an SUV.

Yet, while you won't see lights or hear sirens as they drive through Ada County, it doesn't mean they're not saving lives.

On Tuesday, the group checked on Thressa Smith. Smith is diabetic, and when her blood sugar drops, her family has to call 911. Smith says she used to need emergency care several times a month, but not anymore.

"I think it's nice that I don't have to call emergency 911," says Smith.

That's because the community paramedics go over Smith's medication and take her vitals, providing healthcare now, to keep her out of an emergency later.

HOW IT WORKS

"Normally 911 is waiting for a call. We are proactively going to a patient's house before they have to call 911," says Community Paramedic Jeremiah Wickam.

Wickam says they do more than check on patients; they get a look inside their home life. Then, they share the patient's health threats with their doctor.

However, what could be most helpful to their health is the personal concern and care these medical professionals provide.

"I think they are treating me pretty good," says Smith.

"The patients that I've seen love it, they've finally see that, or feel like, somebody cares," says Wickam.

Right now the paramedics are seeing several patients, like Smith, who are frequent users of the 911 system.

They are also checking on patients recently discharged from the emergency room,

along with those referred to the program by authorities.

Paramedics say they are working to gather data on the success rate of their visits during this first year of the pilot program.

They are also trying to figure out exactly how much money this program will save for patients, emergency responders and hospitals.