

LIFELINE MEDICAL ALERT SERVICE

Not Just for the Elderly Anymore

Confined to a wheelchair, Kristen Smith values her independence. But the 30-year-old also likes knowing that if she does need help, it is just within reach at the push of a button.

Shown: Kristen Smith, 30, of Green Brook, is one of many Lifeline clients at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital Somerset who is dispelling the myth that a medical alert system is only needed by the elderly.



Shown above: Kathi Bennett, Manager of the Lifeline Medical Alert Service at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital Somerset and New Brunswick, encourages individuals of any age who spend a great deal of time alone to explore the hospital's program offered in conjunction with Phillips. The unique service includes no long-term commitment contracts, flexibility in response options like calling family instead of an ambulance, and the ability to signal for other home safety emergencies like fire or a home invasion.

Ms. Smith, an artist and substitute teacher who lives in Green Brook, began using Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital Somerset's (RWJ Somerset) Lifeline Medical Alert Service in 2008. A genetic disease called spinal muscular atrophy has progressively affected her muscles, impacting her ability to stand and walk. She has been using a wheelchair since the age of 13.

Ms. Smith fell in her bathroom while home alone one day in 2008. A neighbor heard her

shouts for help and called 911. The incident made her realize that she needed a backup plan should she need help again.

She wears her medical alert button around her wrist, which she can press to summon help 24/7. When activated, it dials the Phillips Lifeline Response Center. Through the Lifeline unit, the response center can communicate with her to determine the nature of the problem and if needed, help will be dispatched – whether it is a helping hand from a friend or family member or emergency personnel. If Ms. Smith does not respond, her designated responders will be called.

"I've felt a lot more secure since becoming a Lifeline member," she said. "It's a big relief to have a safety net."

Trish McFadden of Bridgewater began using Lifeline 10 years ago for her daughter, Sarah, now 32, who is developmentally challenged due to brain cancer when she was younger and who now suffers from seizures.

Mrs. McFadden, who works in the Human Resources Department at Sanofi in Bridgewater, was constantly worried that her daughter would have a seizure while she was at work and would fall and injure herself.

"I was a wreck at work all day. I didn't know if I'd be able to continue to work," she said.

Her daughter wears her personal help button as a pendant around her neck and presses it whenever she has a seizure. The Lifeline service then notifies her mother of the incident.

"It's such peace of mind for me to know that all she has to do is push the button," Mrs. McFadden said. "It's just been a godsend. It has enabled me to keep working."

"While many people associate medical alert systems with the elderly, it is really for anyone - of any age - who spends time alone and may need emergency assistance for any number of reasons such as medical, fire or intruder," says Kathi Bennett, Manager of the Lifeline Program at RWJ Somerset. "We have clients recovering from strokes or surgery, recently discharged from the hospital or rehab and those managing chronic conditions such as diabetes or congestive heart failure. We offer a wide range of FDA-approved products and services to help meet each individual's needs."

Options include wireless devices that work in homes that do not have a telephone line, a mobile medical alert system that can be used even when the individual is away from home and an AutoAlert service, which will automatically call for help after a fall is detected and the user is unable to push the button. Battery backup is available to ensure service even during power outages.

Experts from RWJ Somerset's Lifeline Program conduct home visits to install and maintain the medical alert equipment. A monthly fee covers the cost of the monitoring service. There is no long-term commitment as service is provided on a month-to-month basis. For a reduced fee, equipment can be shipped directly to Lifeline subscribers to install themselves.

The Lifeline Program has more than 500 clients, primarily in the Somerset County area. The program recently expanded and is available for patients and community members who live in the area served by RWJ New Brunswick.

"I would recommend Lifeline to anyone whose family and friends can't be around all the time," said Ms. Smith. "They've always been very responsive whenever I've needed them and it has given me the freedom to be on my own."

Visit www.rwjuh.edu/lifeline or call 908-704-0096.

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