

Knights' program fights off high medical prices

By **STEVE POWELL**
North Kitsap Herald

These knights wear jeans and t-shirts instead of shining armor but they are heroes to those in need nonetheless.

When facing an urgent medical need, you don't have time to comparison shop.

- An electric wheelchair costs from \$650 to \$4,000.
- Hospital beds cost from \$1,800 to \$14,000.
- Even a walker costs from \$30 to \$200.

To help people in their time of desperate need, the Knights of Columbus have their KC HELP program. Best of all it's free.

KC HELP stands for Knights Community Hospital Equipment Lend Program. It was started in the Tri Cities in 1996. The KofC who started the program saw the need for medical equipment for those who could not afford to rent or buy it, whether they had insurance or not. People started donating items, and the program grew so fast it needed more volunteers and became a 501(c)3 charity.

Larry Devlin caught wind of it and started one in Bainbridge Island-Poulsbo-Kingston in 2017. Devlin, who has lived on BI since 1979, said, "I figured I better get it going here." After retiring from Bechtel Corp., "I had to do something."

It's been a godsend for many, especially the elderly. With four months to go in the year, the program has saved clients \$211,440, more than all of last year, which had been the best yet.

Devlin said while many charities started backing off their help due to COVID-19, their efforts picked up. "We became an essential service," he said. After a low of 13 calls in April of 2020, the organization received 206 calls for help last month. His KC HELP group serves all of Western Washington, but mostly the Kitsap Peninsula.

"Equipment comes and goes like wildfire," Devlin said.

Already loaned out this year are: 136 walkers, 87 wheelchairs, 74 bath benches, 53 commodes, 48 bed rails and 43 beds, plus many other items. Devlin said his group needs donations of equipment (especially manual wheelchairs), money and volunteers, who clean, sterilize, repair and distribute donated equipment, among other things. You don't have to be involved with the KofC to be a part of this.

"You wouldn't believe how many people don't have someone to help them," he said, adding supplies have to pass the "dignity test" before they go out. "Would you let your mom or grandma use this?"

The supplies, which include Depends and a medical grab bar sometimes teasingly called a "stripper pole," aren't just for the elderly. Anyone who needs it can get it. "We don't ask any questions," Devlin said. Of course he prefers if people can pick up what they need at their warehouse near the Agate Pass Bridge, "because gas is so expensive." But they also deliver items and can set equipment up if needed. Their brochure says if you have insurance use it to get the items you can, and KC HELP can fill in the gaps. That makes their donations go further. People can keep the items as



Larry Devlin runs the local KC HELP program. Volunteers collect, repair and distribute donated hospital equipment all over Western Washington for free. Photos by Steve Powell / North Kitsap Herald



After returning some loaned items back to BI, Mike Slavin cleans up some equipment to take to the Bremerton area to other people who need to borrow it.



Walkers are available in a variety of colors.

long as they need them, but it is a lending program so they hope items will be returned. "We get a pretty good response on that," Devlin said, adding, but "we don't go hunt them down."

He said most of the equipment donations don't come from companies but from individuals cleaning out their garages. Volunteers fix what they can but parts can be costly. Volunteer Anthony Farrell said some people try to take too much, so he'll tell them they can't furnish their home.

Devlin's group was featured in the KofC "Columbia" magazine for helping a 27-year-old Seattle woman who was homebound get a motorized wheelchair, hospital bed and special mattress, and shower chair not covered by her insurance.

"I've never been in contact with people who were so genuinely caring. It's just restored my faith in humanity," Tiarra said. Devlin added: "You really feel

like you're making a difference in someone's life. You can't imagine the kind of hardships they go through."

He said even if people have insurance that can take a lot of time, and people "at a low point in their lives" need help now. KC HELP can fill that gap.

"They don't have time to wait. They're scrambling around and can be charged top dollar" by those willing to take advantage, Devlin said.

He added they don't deserve to be harassed.

"We don't want to be part of the problem. We want to be part of the solution," he said.

The basics

KC HELP — Kitsap Peninsula
Address: P.O. Box 1951, Poulsbo, WA 98370.
Phone: 360-329-2461
Email: kchelp.kofc@gmail.com
Website: kofc8297.org/kc-help
Facebook: @kchelpwestwa.



Beds, scooters and electric wheelchairs are among the donated items.



Some lifts are available and KC HELP volunteers can help with installation.

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