

## Resolution No. 07-04

### DECLARING FALLS OF OLDER ADULTS TO BE A SERIOUS THREAT TO THE HEALTH AND WELL-BEING OF THE CITIZENS OF WASHINGTON STATE

**WHEREAS** falls are a major health problem among older adults in the United States, with one in three community-dwelling people aged 65 or older experiencing a fall at least once a year (1) and an estimated 50 percent of those over age 80 experiencing a fall at least once in a year; and

**WHEREAS** falls are the leading cause of injury-related death of older adults in Washington State, with 456 deaths in 2005 (2); and

**WHEREAS** falls are the leading cause of injury-related hospitalizations among older adults in Washington State with over 12,214 hospitalizations in 2005 (3); and

**WHEREAS** the rates of fall-related deaths among older adults rose significantly over the past decade (4); and

**WHEREAS** Washington's population age 65 and over, estimated at 711,810 in 2005, is expected to reach 1.2 million by 2020 and nearly 1.7 million by 2030; and those at greatest risk for falls in the 85 years and over age group are estimated at 104,420 in 2005, with a forecast of 141,090 by 2020, and more than 200,000 by 2030 (5); and

**WHEREAS** older adult falls was the leading cost of fatal and nonfatal hospitalizations in Washington State, costing \$315.7 million in 2003 (6); and

**WHEREAS** falling is associated with subsequent admission to a nursing home, with less than a quarter (22%) of Washington seniors who were hospitalized for a fall in 2005 able to be released to their home under self care and about 59% were transferred to skilled nursing facilities or intermediate care facilities for additional care (7); and

**WHEREAS** 20-30 percent of older adults fear falling, which can cause them to limit their activities, leading to reduced physical fitness, reduced mobility, depression, social isolation and an increase in the risk of falling (9, 10, 11); and

**WHEREAS** many individual risk factors for falls are potentially modifiable, including muscle weakness, untreated or mismanaged chronic conditions, gait deficit, balance deficit, use of assistive devices, taking four or more medications or any psychoactive medications, cognitive impairment, visual deficit, and depression (12); and

**WHEREAS** environmental risk factors include fall hazards in and around the home and hazards in public places including poor building design and/or maintenance, poor stair design, poor lighting, slippery or uneven surfaces, obstacles and tripping hazards; and

**WHEREAS** multifaceted fall prevention programs that include a reduction of risk factors and community education can significantly decrease the number of people who fall; and

**WHEREAS** government agencies including public health, state, county and city government; healthcare providers, practitioners, hospitals and health care facilities; recreation services; older adult living facilities; agencies that serve older adults; private businesses and nonprofits all play a role in reducing falls risk factors; and

**WHEREAS** it is the purpose of the Washington State Public Health Association (WSPHA) to provide leadership for public health advocacy in the state and to promote public health issues;

**THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED** that WSPHA declares that falls are a major public health problem for older adults and pose a serious threat to the health and well being of citizens throughout Washington State; and

**BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that WSPHA encourages the implementation of evidence-based multicomponent falls prevention interventions that encourage individuals to:

- Have an individual falls risk assessment
- Begin a regular exercise program that includes balance and strength training
- Reduce hazards in their home that can lead to falls
- Review all prescription and over-the counter medications with a healthcare provider or pharmacist to reduce side effects and interactions that may contribute to falls.
- Have vision checked annually

**BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that WSPHA urges community-based organizations to develop strategies, implement evidence-based programs and leverage resources aimed at reducing falls and fall risk factors among older adults; and

**BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that WSPHA urges government agencies, private businesses, health care providers, and community organizations to immediately adopt and begin to implement system-level integration of evidence-based strategies, policies and practices to reduce the risk factors associated with falls as outlined in the Washington State Injury Prevention Plan (to be released Fall 2007).

**BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that WSPHA supports federal, state and local legislative, regulatory and funding initiatives to provide public education and awareness campaigns for older adults and their families, provide for professional education for health care providers about how to prevent falls in their older adult patients, expand and intensify evidence based fall prevention programs to at-risk populations and improve the treatment and rehabilitation of older falls victims.

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**Supporting Individuals or Organizations:**

- Pierce County Falls Prevention Coalition
- Northwest Orthopaedic Association
- Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department

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