



Caring that Feels Right at Home
Press Release

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Power Wheelchair from Medicare Helps Save Elderly Alabama Woman from Raging Fire that Destroyed Her Home of 40 years

Close Call for Woman Who Needed Power Wheelchair to Escape the Blaze

OPELIKA, ALA – When Roena Hall, 75, received a power wheelchair through Medicare a year ago, it improved her mobility and relieved some of the pain in her back. But she didn't realize that the medical device would also help save her life.

Two weeks ago, as Hall fried fish for lunch in the kitchen of her converted trailer home, grease in the frying pan suddenly caught fire. As she moved the pan to the sink, flames shot up igniting the cabinets and the rest of the kitchen. Thinking fast, Hall maneuvered her power chair to the living room, where she called 911, and told them her house was in flames.

“They asked me if I could get out safely, and I told them, ‘No!’ because I was in a wheelchair,” she recalls. “They told me to get out to the porch and they would send a Sheriff’s Deputy to help me.”

Seconds later, Hall was on the front porch as her home of more than 40 years was fully engulfed in flames that blazed dangerously towards the front porch. Luckily, a Deputy from the Lee County Sheriff’s Department was driving nearby, and arrived in time to help Hall down the stairs, and then bring her power wheelchair to safety.

“When I was on the porch, I didn’t know what I could do,” she says. “The wheelchair had carried me that far. But there were steps and I couldn’t get to the ground. The Deputy got there in five minutes, so I was very lucky. He helped me down, and grabbed my wheelchair just before the flames got to the porch.”

Not every Medicare beneficiary is impacted by a power wheelchair as dramatically as Hall, but mobility assistance brings more freedom and independence to many Medicare patients. Studies also show that power wheelchairs save American taxpayers millions of dollars each year by reducing the number of hospital visits caused by falls and fall related injuries. Mobility assistance can also delay the need for Medicare beneficiaries to be admitted into costly nursing homes, or other institutions.

However, the homecare community – manufacturers, providers, clinicians, consumer advocates and other stakeholders – have been critical of the federal government for implementing policies and regulations that have made it more difficult for Medicare patients to obtain power wheelchairs. For instance, a new competitive bidding program will actually reduce competition and put many power wheelchair providers out of business; a 37 percent cut in reimbursement fees over the last three years has already impacted the finances of providers; and the Government Accountability Office has cited the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services for operating a claims process that is delaying reimbursement payments to legitimate providers. In fact, a recent poll by HomeCare Magazine found that more than 30 percent of the nation’s home medical equipment providers say they will leave the business.

Moreover, a provision in the healthcare reform law eliminated the option for Medicare patients to purchase a power wheelchair during the first month after receiving it. Providers must accept monthly rental payments over a 13-month period, making it difficult for many to afford significant overhead costs associated with acquiring the power wheelchair, delivering it to the patient and servicing it. The new payment process will also make it difficult for patients to have power wheelchairs properly fitted and customized, forcing many Medicare beneficiaries into ill-fitting wheelchairs that can cause pain, pressure sores and loss of mobility.

“Medicare patients, as well as American taxpayers benefit from government strategies and policies that allow beneficiaries to gracefully age at home,” said Tyler Wilson, president of the American Association for Homecare. “The Medicare program needs to adopt aging-at-home as its core philosophy and then implement policies and regulations that assist beneficiaries in achieving that goal. As a nation, we must be smarter about how we spend our healthcare dollars.”

One of the biggest concerns, Wilson said, is that small, rural communities, such as Opelika, could soon be without durable medical equipment providers who can service those areas because of the adverse impact that government policies have had on their businesses.

Meanwhile, Hall is grateful that Medicare was able to provide her a power wheelchair a year ago.

She had back surgery five years ago, and used a manual wheelchair after the operation. But the pain intensified and she needed a power wheelchair to relieve the stress on her legs and back. Hall retired from a magnetic tape manufacturing plant back in 1989 to care for her husband, who passed away a few years later. Over the years, she had renovated her trailer by adding two rooms, and fortifying the structure with logs on the outside.

Hall refused to be discouraged by her loss, saying she was staying with longtime friends and expected to soon move into an assisted living facility. She was even able to joke about the day of the fire, noting that she sat in her wheelchair under some trees and watched her log cabin burn down.

“It was hot outside, and it was hot inside,” she says.

The American Association for Homecare represents durable medical equipment providers and manufacturers who serve the medical needs of millions of Americans who require oxygen equipment and therapy, wheelchairs and assistive technologies, medical supplies, inhalation drug therapy, and other medical equipment and services in their homes. Visit www.aahomecare.org/athome.