

Just walk a mile...in any shoes

Moving Grays Harbor
By Maryann Welch

Most of us don't imagine an "assisted living facility" to be filled with enthusiastic fitness participants, but one local facility is challenging that image. Channel Point Village in Hoquiam is quietly becoming notable for the number of residents using their walkers and canes as valuable pieces of exercise equipment. You may be surprised to learn just how much active walking takes place there on a daily basis. A group of 31 residents has logged enough miles to get to Vancouver, British Columbia and back in just under two months – that is 550.5 miles!

Searching for a way to promote more physical activity among residents, Cindy Wakefield, Channel Point's Activity Director and one of the YMCA's All-Star Biggest Losers, dreamed up the idea of a "Are We There Yet?" Senior Road Trip, Walking Washington. With each participant logging their daily walking accumulations, Cindy predicted the trip to Vancouver would take several months. The travelers quickly tallied up miles on their personal tracking sheets and reached Vancouver in less than a month. Since the trip took less time than expected, Cindy decided they'd have to walk back to Hoquiam as well, reaching their goal by early November – no one wanted to miss out on Thanksgiving it seems!

To get this project started Cindy measured the distance in feet from each apartment in the complex to the dining room and activity room. She also mapped out a route through the hallways that added up to one mile. Each participant could simply keep track

of their daily treks to meals and activities and add on any extra distance. A large map of the state on the wall measured the travelers' progress toward their international goal.

I had the opportunity to visit with a particularly enthusiastic "Are We There Yet?" participant, Babe Stobie. Babe, who is 75, still exudes the vibrant personality that won her the title of the 1949 Cranberry Queen in Grayland! A 9 ½ year Channel Point resident, Babe navigates the halls with her walker and travels ½ mile each day while making her way back and forth to meals and activities. Since joining the "Walking Washington" team she has been motivated to add an extra mile to her routine each day. That extra mile is split up in to 2 or 3 different segments throughout the day. Babe can quickly rattle off the benefits she's already realized from her increased walking activity. Dropping 16 pounds has been the most dramatic change and she also reports a decrease in her asthma symptoms, more energy, improved blood pressure, and is sleeping "earlier and better." In fact, Babe returned from her last doctor appointment reporting raves about her improved overall health status.

This successful program at Channel Point demonstrates that the ability to be physically active can be influenced in a large part by the living environment we each experience. My mother-in-law, Margaret Welch, moved to Channel Point this fall from a double-wide mobile home. The interior of the mobile home was safe and accessible, but provided little opportunity for activity without venturing outside. Since moving to Channel Point, Margaret's activity level has increased significantly. She has to walk a lot further to get meals in the dining room, do laundry, and retrieve mail than she did when she was living in the mobile home. She now uses a walker and this physical support device enables her to navigate safely through

the facility while still maintaining her independence and helping her increase her fitness level. Family, friends, Channel Point staff and Margaret herself have all noted her increased energy, mobility and mental sharpness.

Cindy has been very insightful in her approach to this new venture. She has incorporated some important factors in spurring increased activity: setting a goal; tracking progress; and providing support and encouragement. This dedicated group will be deciding soon where their next trip will take them and I'm betting it might be to somewhere warm!

This just proves that sometimes it takes many factors to motivate us to change our behaviors. In Channel Point's case, the facility was always accommodating to walkers, the residents had the ability to walk, but more motivation was needed for many residents. Kudos to Cindy for finding a way to make activity fun and rewarding for all those who participated.

I hope that if you see yourself being physically limited by your environment that you can find a way to make a positive change. As you have read, a few extra steps a day really do add up to better health.

Maryann Welch is the recently retired director of Grays Harbor County's Public Health and Social Services Department.

If you have questions about becoming more active or have information about free or low-cost activity in the area, contact the health department at 532-8665 ext. 483, e-mail us at moving@co.grays-harbor.wa.us or visit our web site at www.ghphss.org.