



2013 RURAL HERO OF THE YEAR

THE OREGON OFFICE OF RURAL HEALTH IS PROUD TO PRESENT THIS YEAR'S RURAL HEALTH HERO OF THE YEAR AWARD TO VERNA PETTYJOHN. FOLLOWING ARE SUBMISSION EXCERPTS FROM THOSE WHO SUPPORTED THE NOMINATION.

EXCEPTIONAL CONTRIBUTION

Since November 2005 Verna Pettyjohn has been a dedicated, committed Medicare Counselor and Advocate for Harney County. She averages 180 client contacts per year assisting these people with all manner of health care access and Medicare information needs. She spends at least 20 hours per week counseling clients, developing and implementing program outreach, training other volunteer counselors, grant writing and coordinating the SHIBA (Senior Health Insurance Benefits Assistance) program. Without Verna's total dedication to this program as well as the clients' needs in her community, many would go without lifesaving medications, unable to afford to go to their doctor, and would end up paying for medical services that would have been covered by insurance if they only had access to the correct information.

"ABOVE AND BEYOND" VOLUNTEERISM

The SHIBA program trains volunteers and requests that they communicate information about Medicare and its related insurance options. Verna goes not the extra mile but an extra ten miles as the SHIBA Coordinator for Harney County. SHIBA contracted sponsors must meet certain grant requirements each year. The requirements relate to processes as well as outreach in the community. Harney County has consistently led the state in terms of performance and outreach in the community, receiving Exemplary Benchmarks (reserved for those sponsors that meet or exceed the maximum target set by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid (CMS)). For example:

- 2009 – Exemplary Benchmark target was to reach 13.4 % of Medicare beneficiaries in Harney County. Verna and her team reached 26.4 % of those in her area.
- 2010 – Exemplary Benchmark target was to reach 12.5 %. Harney County reached 30.3%.
- 2011 - Exemplary Benchmark target was to reach 12.5 %. Harney County reached 28.9%.
- 2012 - Exemplary Benchmark target was to reach 12.5 %. Harney County reached 23.6%.

Verna implemented a Patient Assistance and Chronic Disease Funds program for Harney County from 1992 to the present. Over 136 individuals have been assisted with through this program in the last five years. Verna generated thousands of dollars for people so they could access medications and treatment. One patient received a \$6,000 drug copay card for a two-year period. Others received a \$9,000 copay for lung cancer treatment for a three year period, \$6,000 for ESRD treatment, \$10,000 for breast cancer chemotherapy, \$16,000 in LTC benefits that had been denied until Verna appealed. For yet another patient, Verna cleaned her house one day a week and helped with financial management allowing her to remain independent and live in her own home. Savings? Priceless. A social

worker at Burns Hospital calls Verna for patients with special needs i.e. patient could not get discharged from the hospital until she had money for insulin and access to food. Verna got the \$360 for insulin and drove the client to food bank. Twenty three loggers in Burns who appealed for money owed from a company won \$70,000 for a three-year period. In Verna's own words, "This was the biggest thing I did in my life". The Oregon Loggers Association sent her a message that they had fought this in court for many years and had not ever won anything for this kind of case.

IMPACT ON THE COMMUNITY

Besides researching and successfully securing multi-thousands of dollars worth of medication and medical benefits over the years and coordinating the SHIBA program, she devotes her time to a number of other community projects. As campaign manager for the 2400sq. ft. addition to the Harney County Senior and Community Services Center, Verna participated in securing \$500,000 in grants and the building was completed in May of 2013. She serves on the Harney County District Hospital Health Advisory Committee, the Wellness Committee of the Harney District Hospital, the Harney County Senior and Community Services Center Advisory Board and was elected to the Harney County Senior Board of Directors in 2013. The Harney County Senior and Community Services Center and its expanded facilities will impact the community for at least 100 years, maybe longer. Verna's role model to her community will inspire others to pick up where she leaves off. She has done a wonderful job of recruiting and training others in how she accomplishes her feats of magic. The individuals whose lives she saved and improved their quality of life will pass on to the generations of children and grandchildren who did not lose a loved one prematurely just because they could not afford medications.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Verna makes herself available to seniors in need at all times of the day. She has them come to her home if the senior center is unavailable. She goes to them in the hospital, care facilities and their own homes if that is what they need. She follows up with them and reaches out to other programs if she thinks it would benefit them. She is truly their advocate and works hard to meet their needs and their wishes. Verna stays current on all education available to her regarding SHIBA and needed medications. She ensures her volunteers take advantage of the same educational opportunities. Verna wants to ensure she knows all she can when it comes to helping her neighbors remain in their homes and community. She recently completed a two year process through which her grant writing and campaigning resulted in a 2400sq. ft. extension of the Senior Center, adding a conference room, three offices and a large activities room. The work was contracted locally and gave our struggling community a needed boost, keeping contractors and laborers working at a time they would have otherwise been laid off. She has provided a beautiful space for seniors to meet and socialize. Verna is a dedicated advocate and friend to the seniors in our community.

The people she helps are more than clients to Verna. They are her neighbors and they become her friends because Verna is always there for them. She does more than connect them to services. She sees them as people and she does everything she can to get them what they need. She follows through and follows up. As their needs change, her approach changes. She will seek OPI services to keep someone in their home, yet if that is not possible she will do what she needs to fight for a spot for them in assisted living.

Verna is our "Energizer Bunny" never giving up. She takes on a project, be it a client or a community need and she sticks with it until the outcome is what she wants it to be. She meets setbacks with the "we will just try again" attitude that fosters success.

Verna always goes above and beyond in her efforts. From attending the numerous trainings to learn how to better serve our residents to making sure individuals have access to needed medications to assisting our seniors with complex Medicare issues, Verna is knowledgeable and persistent. She takes her role as an educator and advocate very seriously, facing complex issues head-on for the benefit of this community. She is supposedly retired, but that is only true in terms of being a wage-earner. Verna does all this and much, much more as an incredibly active volunteer.

**CONGRATULATIONS, VERNA, AND THANK YOU FOR ALL YOU HAVE DONE
AND CONTINUE TO DO!**