

# Top safety expert wants defibrillators in every school

By DAVID ABRAMS, Staff Writer

The school system's top safety expert wants to install defibrillators in every school in the county to avert a nightmare of five years ago from happening again.

Nancy Nelson, 49, a beloved teacher at Millersville Elementary School her students called "The Great Mathematician," collapsed of a heart attack one morning as students filed into her classroom. Attempts to revive her were unsuccessful.

Five years later, all 12 high schools have the wall-mounted devices that can jolt enough electricity into a victim's body to possibly save them. Severna Park Middle School and the system's administrative offices also have the machines.

But Diane Ferguson, chief of occupational safety for the schools, wants all 120 schools to have a defibrillator in case of emergency.

"I really think as time goes by it's going to be a situation sort of like fire extinguishers are today," Ms. Ferguson said. "They'll become routine equipment."

At roughly \$1,400 each, she estimated that adding defibrillators in the remaining schools would cost about \$150,000. But Ms. Ferguson also knows that the school system grapples with other costs related to instruction.

She lobbied for two years to finally get the machines in the high schools, and would be "thrilled" to see a rolling schedule implemented with a couple more installed every year until all schools are covered.

The American Heart Association recommends that the machines be installed in any building where a large number of people congregate. About 220,000 people die each year from a sudden cardiac arrest, while about 7,000 children die suddenly after being struck in the chest or from some undiagnosed heart problem.

"Any kid can be hit in the chest, and the heart stops," Ms. Ferguson said.

In 1996, Charles E. "Sonny" Wells suffered a fatal heart attack at South River High School. The custodial supervisor had just finished shoveling snow and was chatting with coworkers when the attack occurred.

School Board Vice President Tricia Johnson, who herself had open-heart surgery years ago, said she hopes the system can keep expanding the use of defibrillators.

"It would be a great asset to have in every building," she said.

While several officials said the cost of the program and availability of money is the only thing standing in the way of expanding the program, they all favored the idea.

After the school system's budget proposal is announced tomorrow, Ms. Johnson said board members will have a better idea of how defibrillators might fit in with the rest of the spending.

"What's the price for somebody's life?" asked Councilman Cathleen M. Vitale, R-Severna Park. "About \$1,400 is pretty cheap."

Ms. Vitale was appointed to the council after the tragic death of her predecessor, Cliff Roop six years ago today. He died of a heart attack at a council meeting.

Mr. Roop's death prompted the county to add more defibrillators in county buildings. The non-profit Cliff R. Roop Cardiac Support and Education Foundation was started in his name, and has put 28 of the machines in public places around the county.

"When you hear the stories of someone using a defibrillator, they're always in odd situations," Ms. Vitale said.

Seven buildings were equipped with the machines in 2003, including the County Council's chambers.

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