

STEMI Program a Lifesaver for Volunteer Firefighter

It wasn't a case of simple ignorance that kept Cle Elum's Tessy Balaoro from calling 911 when she started experiencing heart attack symptoms.

After all, even the informed aren't always immune to a case of stubborn denial.

The 45-year-old Balaoro, a volunteer firefighter and EMT with Fire District 7 and the South Cle Elum Fire Department, knows the warning signs of a heart attack.

But when Balaoro herself suffered heart attack symptoms she didn't rush to call 911.

She took her time.

Fortunately for Balaoro, Kittitas County's award-winning STEMI (ST Elevation Myocardial Infarction) program which aims to speed up response time for heart attack victims was there to help.

In the early morning hours of July 17, Balaoro returned home after a night out with friends. Climbing the stairs to her apartment left her exhausted. Her chest hurt and she was short of breath.

Balaoro, who had been under stress in recent months, wrote those warning signs off.

"I honestly thought it was anxiety. I really did," she says. "I took a bath thinking it would help relax me. It didn't. Then I went into a cold sweat. I know what that means."

Did she call 911?

No, she admits now, smiling sheepishly.

Instead, she dialed her son.

"I think I'm having a heart attack," she told him.

"I'm no doctor," he advised. "But you'd better call 911."

Balaoro got dressed, walked to the door to unlock it for emergency responders and headed back to bed.

"I could barely make it," she says. "I could barely breathe. I called 911."

An Upper Kittitas County Medic 1 ambulance arrived bearing EMT Lee Hadden, a longtime friend of Balaoro, and paramedic Beth Williams. Like Balaoro, Hadden and Williams also are Fire District 7 volunteers.

"I told Beth to slap a 12-lead (an advanced EKG) on me and call it good so I could go back to sleep," Balaoro recalls, still clinging to disbelief. "She said, 'Sorry sweetheart. Not this time.'" Members of the Cle Elum Volunteer Fire Department helped move Balaoro down the long flight of steps from her apartment to the ambulance.

There, Balaoro says she called her son a second time.

"Dude," she told him. "I really *am* having a heart attack."

Even a few years ago, Balaoro would have been transported first to Kittitas Valley Community Hospital's emergency room where she would have been evaluated and then transferred to Yakima Regional Medical Center which has the closest coronary catheterization lab. That stop in Ellensburg would have eaten up critical time. But under Kittitas County's STEMI program, with the EKG and field lab results performed in the ambulance clearly pointing to a heart attack, Medic 1 transported her directly to Yakima Regional Medical Center where a coronary catheterization lab team was waiting for her.

"I had two blockages in one artery. One had totally blocked the artery. The other was a 50 percent blockage. The doctors told me it was pretty bad," says Balaoro, who had a stent implanted to keep the artery opened and was released from the hospital two days later.

Her heart attack caused some heart damage. But Balaoro, who is studying to become a certified medical



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-Tessy Balaoro*

assistant and delighting in a new role as grandmother to a 7-month-old granddaughter, says that damage “is not as bad as it could have been without STEMI.

“Without STEMI, my heart damage could have been much, much worse.”

Mark Raaka, head of Upper Kittitas County Medic 1, agrees. He wishes she'd called 911 sooner but is thankful she finally made the call. “When a heart attack occurs getting help as quickly as possible is vital. If Balaoro hadn't called 911 and waited until morning to see a doctor, heart cells would have continued to die,” Raaka says. “If enough cells had died she would have gone into a rhythm that would have been incompatible with life. The worst case scenario is that she would have died.”