

Social Supports and Many Other Services Contribute to Healthy Aging

October is Healthy Aging Month; October 10, 2013 is World Mental Health Day

To live a high quality life, many aspects of life must be consistently addressed: not only physical and behavioral health, but also the need for social connections, positive family and other relationships, recreation and other stimulating activities. The Jewish Family Service (JFS) agencies throughout the state offer a range of services to meet these needs. Their staff also conducts outreach to proactively engage individuals and families into their services. While these agencies serve individuals of all ages, Healthy Aging Month presents an opportunity to highlight their services for the elderly population specifically.

"Aging can be depressing, especially as the elderly watch friends and family members become ill, as well as experiencing illnesses themselves. Depression also can lead to physical illness, such as cancer, heart disease and diabetes. Furthermore, addictions are common among elders, and they are often under-reported and, therefore, under-treated," said Lisa Fedder, Executive Director, JFS of Bergen and North Hudson. "Our clinical services help minimize this."

"The signs of depression in the elderly are atypical," noted Dale Oftei-Ayisi, LCSW, Coordinator of Community Services, Rutgers University Behavioral Health Care (UBHC). "Because of stigma, many elderly individuals will say 'No' when asked if they are depressed. Instead, they often experience somatic symptoms, such as head, back and stomach aches, or become angry, irritable or isolated."

"Our goal is to keep older adults safe, stable, healthy and happy in their homes and communities with dignity for as long as possible. We call this aging in place. We literally save lives," said Reuben Rotman, Executive Director, JFS of Metrowest. "We facilitate the transition to other living environments that become necessary because of aging, psychiatric history, the economy or other dynamics. Our agencies are extended families for many older adults, especially those who don't have children locally or are estranged from their children."

"Collectively, all of our member providers offer a full continuum of services for every age group and many organizations, such as the JFS agencies, individually provide a broad range of services that meet a variety of needs," said Debra L. Wentz, PhD, Chief Executive Officer, New Jersey Association of Mental Health and Addiction Agencies (NJAMHAA), a trade association of which the state's 12 JFS agencies are members. "I am proud to represent these vital organizations through advocacy to leaders in our state and federal governments and through the media. Our advocacy also serves as essential education for everyone, from legislators and policymakers to the general public, which helps ensure awareness of and access to these services, which are proven to both save and greatly enhance people's lives."

Services for Caregivers Help Enhance Care for the Elderly

Several JFS agencies and UBHC, as well as Trinitas Regional Medical Center, also offer programs to support caregivers. Children of older adults commonly experience stress and exhaustion, yet they tend to not give themselves breaks or, if they do, they may feel guilty about it. "We're showing caregivers that self-care is not only okay, but it's also essential for providing good care," said Steven Sonhle, PsyD, Clinician Administrator for the COPSA (Comprehensive Services on Aging) Program at UBHC and Assistant Professor, Department of Psychiatry at Robert Wood Johnson Medical School.

Trinitas' Statewide Clinical Outreach Program for the Elderly (S-COPE) program has a similar focus, but with care providers in nursing homes. S-COPE also entails training nursing home staff to identify and manage behavioral issues that do not require emergency room (ER) visits. The S-COPE team also encourages acceptance of residents' return from ERs by providing on-site assessment and clinical follow-up, as well as incorporating this topic into the staff training.

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