

# The Impact of Social Support Services on Health: Lessons from The POINT on Increasing Access to Community Services and Social Support

Hannah Shamji

**Access to social support services is a** major determinant of health, particularly as people age. A recent study examining the relationship between physical health and stress on adolescents, middle-age adults, and older adults concluded that although a decline in physical health is suffered by all age groups under social stress, bodily function deteriorates more quickly in older adults with no social support, compared to individuals of equal age who have social support.<sup>1</sup> The unique interplay of health and social factors, particularly among the elderly, highlights the immediate need for improved access to social support services.

While best addressed by multiple disciplines, managing social stress is a responsibility that frequently falls to the primary care physician. In fact, up to one third of patients visit their primary care physician with nonmedical issues.<sup>2</sup> The relationship of trust and confidence between patients and their doctors uniquely positions clinicians to provide nonmedical care in a setting that supports patient receptivity. Limited by time and resources, however, clinicians may not be able to address patient needs outside of the medical arena and must rely on referring patients to other resources. Without a single, networked organization for physicians and patients across the state, identifying appropriate and reliable financial and medical services requires an unrealistic amount of detective work from the physician.

National data also indicate that many senior patients delay seeking care for various reasons, including not wanting to bother the physician, or not feeling comfortable disclosing personal and perhaps seemingly unrelated information.<sup>3</sup> Patients are also unlikely to inquire about

support, often assuming their doctor will direct them accordingly. However, without guidance from the patient, physicians are unable to deliver appropriate nonmedical assistance. Physician practices can facilitate awareness by educating staff about available social support services or by posting fliers. Such efforts emphasize the importance of social support to the patient and help identify suitable resources.

In particular, patients—by way of their primary care physicians—may turn to The POINT to help locate the support they need. The POINT is a state-wide resource that guides seniors and adults with disabilities through actionable solutions to increase access to social support services. In directing patients to The POINT, physicians can be assured that patients will receive appropriate support to address their financial and social concerns through a variety of services such as:

- options counseling for long-term support options (including in-home, community-based, and institutional services and programs),
- transportation services (for doctors' appointments, therapy, medical tests, senior day care, kidney dialysis, cancer treatments) through the RIDE Program,
- nutritionally balanced meals through meal site lunches five days a week at over 75 meal sites, or the Meals on Wheels of Rhode Island Program services,
- assistance to identify and contact appropriate financial services (public assistance programs and private pay services), and

- resources for patient transition from institutional settings (hospitals and skilled nursing facilities) back to the community.

Endorsing and facilitating awareness of The POINT can provide necessary support for patients who are willing to self-manage, and position them for improved health outcomes. The POINT can serve as a primary resource for physicians, complementing the comprehensive care they deliver to the patient. The support The POINT provides can increase the efficiency and effectiveness with which physicians administer medical care.

Services through THE POINT are free and confidential. Patients can seek immediate support or assistance at *any* time by calling 462-4444 (TTY: 462-4445). Please visit [www.thepointri.org](http://www.thepointri.org) for more information and [call] to collect fliers and other material from The POINT to distribute throughout your office.

## REFERENCES

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*Hannah Shamji is an MPH candidate at the Warren Alpert Medical School of Brown University, and a Research Assistant at Quality Partners of Rhode Island.*

## Disclosure of Financial Interest

The author and/or their spouse/significant other has no financial interests to disclose.

## CORRESPONDENCE

Hannah Shamji  
phone: (401) 528-3272  
e-mail: [hshamji@riqio.sdsps.org](mailto:hshamji@riqio.sdsps.org)

Established in 2005, **The POINT** is designed to provide information about and referral to a statewide network of programs and services targeted to seniors (60 years of age and older), adults with disabilities (18 years of age and older) and their caregivers. This resource center operates with an annual grant of \$350,000 from the **Rhode Island Department of Elderly Affairs (RIDEA)** through a grant from the federal **Administration on Aging (AoA)**. A three-year grant extension was obtained by the RIDEA in 2009 to help The POINT build partnerships with state departments and services. The POINT currently has eight regional partners and has also worked with **Rhode Island's Department of Human Services (DHS/Medicaid)**, the **Department of Health**, and several community organizations.