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

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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. 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. 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 for more information and [call] to collect fliers and other material from The POINT to distribute throughout your office.

REFERENCES

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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.