

Step Up to Stop Falls: A description of how one grantee in a Fall Prevention Coalition worked to reduce falls in frail, elderly individuals confined to their homes.

Sponsoring Agency: Erie County Department of Senior Services

Description of Initial Problem:

National data shows that rates of falls tend to be highest among those 80 and over, 50% of which will have a fall in any given year. Not only are falls more likely as one ages, those falls are also more likely to result in injury, emergency department visits, and hospitalizations. New York State Department of Health statistics show, for example, that Erie County residents who are 75 or older are 3 times more likely to be hospitalized as a result of a fall than those between the ages of 65 and 74. By 85, likelihood of hospitalization has increased to 6.5 times. New York State estimates that each of these hospitalizations incurs nearly \$20,000 in expenses. Above and beyond the financial and physical toll, falls also have a psychological impact on many who fall, leading to an increased fear of taking another fall. Unfortunately, fear of falling, in and of itself, leads to functional decline, increased depression, and increased social isolation, all of which can further increase fall risk.

In 2007, the Community Health Foundation of Western and Central New York (CHF) began an initiative to bring the Western New York community together in an effort to reduce falls in the elderly. Recognizing the problem to be complex, the CHF reached across a broad swath in order to include a variety of key resources in tackling the problem: university personnel, medical professionals, service providers, health insurers. As a result, a community initiative called Step Up to Stop Falls was born. One facet of the CHF's many pronged approach was to offer grant funding of \$25,000 to 12 partnerships where each proposed a different method of tackling falls in the elderly through practice, education, and other methods.

Brief Program Description:

The Erie County Department of Senior Services, the Area Agency on Aging serving the Buffalo, NY area, partnered with Independent Health (an HMO) to apply for funding to implement the evidence based Otago Program, a series of strength and balance exercises developed by an insurer in New Zealand to help reduce falls in the frail elderly. A third partner joined the venture: Willcare, a certified home care agency that can provide physical and other therapies in the home and receive reimbursement for this treatment from Medicare.

The program design was to have case managers who work with the frail homebound elderly in Erie County identify clients who wished to be part of the exercise program to reduce falls. The average age of program participants was 83, with an average of 2 ADL and 5 IADL deficits. Dubbed "medical train wrecks" by the physical therapist, they all had impaired ambulation, and co-existing conditions such as Parkinson's, history of stroke, arthritis, osteoporosis, tremors, and a history of falls. Once identified, the clients were referred to Willcare, which obtained doctor's orders to assess the client for fall prevention intervention under Medicare. If the client's insurer required a co-pay, grant funds were used to cover out of pocket expenses. This allowed physical therapists to work with clients in their home, and provide individualized Otago training without expense to the client and at very little cost to the Department of Senior Services.

In between visits from the physical therapists, participants would exercise on their own using a provided exercise booklet, and recorded exercise sessions on a program calendar. When the PT intervention ended, case managers met monthly with clients to continue coaching them as a means of reinforcing the behavior learned in physical therapy as well as collecting data on how the client was faring as a result of the program. A series of questions was asked at each coaching visit to find out what the client's personal goal for participating in the exercise program was, whether the client was still doing the exercises, any problems encountered, and if there had been any notable successes.

How does the program help/why do you like the program?

Evidence gathered throughout the program indicates that Otago helped clients in a number of significant ways. Most importantly, both the number of falls experienced by clients and their fall risk were reduced. 93% of participants experienced no new falls while receiving physical therapy and a majority of clients continued to be fall free in the six month coaching phase. Above and beyond reducing the number of falls,

the program had a number of other physical side benefits. 85% of participants reported feeling stronger; 58% also had improved ambulation scores and 33% had improved transferring scores on an OASIS assessment administered before and after the intervention. Most importantly, however, we discovered the program made a real difference in the quality of life of our participants. When we asked participants what the program had meant to them, here are some of the responses we received: "I can go shopping." "I can go to lunch." "I can bake a cake." "I was able to go on a trip to see my grandson get married."

There are many reasons we like the program. Seeing the personal impact the program made in the lives of individual clients was extremely gratifying. Caregivers also reported that the improved ambulation and transferring made their care giving tasks easier and, in some cases, allowed them to continue to provide care at home rather than face the difficult decision of placing their loved one in a nursing home. Overall the program allowed us to take advantage of our unique access to the frail homebound elderly to identify individuals who could benefit from a falls prevention intervention but who would be unable to participate in the types of falls prevention programs that are typically offered in the community.

Total Program Cost and Major Income Sources:

This project was funded with a \$25,000 grant from the Community Health Foundation of Western and Central New York. Grant funds paid insurance co-pays, supported staff salaries, and other administrative costs. Because the physical therapy intervention was billable to Medicare through a certified home care agency, the program was extremely cost effective. In the end, we had approximately 50 clients complete the program at a cost of about \$500 per client. It is important to remember that this included costs associated with data collection and analysis that does not necessarily need to be included in program administration. Even at \$500, however, this cost represents a huge savings for clients and insurers when compared to the potential cost of taking a fall.

Special Issues/Characteristics:

The program had an important impact on participants, who saw a decrease in falling. There are important implications for system development as well. For the larger community, a sustained awareness of fall prevention needs to be developed. The elderly and their families need to be "sold" on how crucial fall prevention is in enhancing quality of life. In the service system, case managers must be trained to assess for fall risk, and to access fall prevention services through Medicare. This is an area not traditionally included in the case managers' repertoire, and necessitates systemic change. In turn, Medicare service providers need training in community based services beyond those in the medical arena. Social service and medical providers need to find ways to connect in order to maximize their positive effects on clients. Similarly, we need to get the word to insurers, who typically do not pay for maintenance therapy. If fall prevention programs can demonstrate decreased falls, and therefore decreased costs of care, in a very frail population, then a strong argument to fund physical therapy for maintenance of functioning can be made. Crucially, the program demonstrated that quality of life can be enhanced even for very frail, very sick people in concrete, measurable ways that in fact are priceless.

For Further Information:

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For information on the Step Up to Stop Falls Collaborative effort of the Community Health Foundation, please go to their website, www.chfwcny.org