

LESSONS LEARNED

In this monthly column, MHAs offer a close-up look at an outstanding local activity and reveal important "lessons learned" about its development and performance.

Georgia Initiative Integrates Mental Health and Primary Care

by Kristine Medea, MA, ABS, director, clinical education, and Jennifer Brewer, MSW, clinical education specialist

When you visit your primary care provider for an annual physical, does your physician check your blood pressure? Your cholesterol? Your pulse? But what about depression? More than likely, your provider does not ask about your mental health. We are trying to change that fact in Georgia with the Georgia Physicians Depression Screening Initiative. The program aims to improve the manner in which clinical depression is detected and diagnosed in primary care settings. It is a collaborative effort of the National Mental Health Association of Georgia (NMHAG); the Georgia Academy of Family Physicians; the Fuqua Center for Late-Life Depression, a branch of Emory University; and Project HOPE, an African American depression awareness campaign.

Launched in the summer of 2000, the initiative stems from the U.S. Surgeon General's landmark 1999 report on mental health. The program is part of NMHA's Campaign for America's Mental Health, which works, in part, to improve the detection of mental illnesses in primary care settings.

With four pilot sites in Georgia's small rural towns and moderate-sized cities, we work with 15 family physicians, and their nurses and staff. Our outreach targets patients of all ages, but we pay particular attention to certain at-risk populations, including older adults and people of color. We have developed a leadership council for each pilot site comprised of community stakeholders who advise us on the mental health needs of their communities and recommend ways to enhance existing mental health services.

We will also work with Kaiser Permanente on a "lunch and learn" series that will provide outreach and education on depression screening to all Atlanta Kaiser Facilities in the metropolitan area. Family physicians, physicians' assistants, nurse practitioners and nurses will receive continuing education credits for participating in this series. NMHAG will provide educational literature on

depression to all Kaiser facilities, which will consist of about 12,000 pieces of literature circulated every six months.

In addition, the initiative, along with another NMHAG program called Project Hope, has joined the Cardiovascular Learning Partnership, which is working to reduce disparities in care for African American women who suffer from cardiovascular disease and diabetes — both of which can increase one's risk for depression. NMHAG will work with 10 cardiologists in the Atlanta area to provide outreach and education on depression screening to 400 women patients.

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—Kristine Medea and Jennifer Brewer

One important lesson learned early on is the need to be conscious of language we use when addressing physicians. For example, our initial goal was to "train" primary care medical professionals to screen for depression, but we soon realized that professionals prefer to receive outreach to "enhance" their already existing knowledge about depression. Using sensitive and respectful language will help ensure that physicians become and remain receptive to our ideas.

At the same time, another strategy we find valuable is to be somewhat assertive in our approach when asking the physicians to participate in the initiative. Many primary care providers challenge the statistic that physicians fail to spot depression in up to 50 percent of their patients. We have made it our job to help them recognize that the statistic is factual, and offer resources on depression screening and referrals within their communities to solve the problem.

By working collaboratively, we have the chance to make a real difference by assisting primary care physicians in their efforts to routinely screen for depression and providing appropriate referral resources to help ensure that all patients receive the mental health services they need and deserve. ■