



Advocacy. Action. Answers on Aging.

Home and Community-Based Services for Older Adults: Mental Health

Mental health is fundamental to the well being of older adults, and has a major impact on quality of life. Yet, the 1999 report by the U.S. Surgeon General on mental health points out that too many older adults struggle with mental disorders that compromise their ability to participate fully in life. The cost of this loss of vitality to older adults, their families, their caregivers, and the country is staggering. Despite substantial numbers of older persons with mental health difficulties, the role of mental health in the continuum of care is largely neglected. There is considerable evidence that many of the problems of older Americans caused by poor mental health could be avoided if treatment and prevention resources were enhanced. Because chronic mental disorders are over-represented in long-term care populations, planning and providing for essential services presents an important health and long-term care policy challenge.

Issue Background

Mental Health and Aging

Most older adults enjoy good mental health, but nearly 20% of those who are 55 years and older experience mental disorders that are not part of normal aging. The most common disorders, in order of prevalence, are anxiety disorders such as phobias and obsessive-compulsive disorder; severe cognitive impairment, including Alzheimer's disease; and mood disorders, such as depression. Schizophrenia and personality disorders are less common. Mental disorders can range from problematic to disabling to fatal. The rate of suicide is higher among older adults than any other age group. Older adults with mental illness vary widely with respect to the onset of their disorders. Some have suffered from serious and persistent mental illness most of their adult lives, while others have had periodic episodes of mental illness. A substantial number of older adults experience mental health disorders or problems for the first time

late in life — problems frequently exacerbated by bereavement or other losses which tend to occur in old age.

Minority populations are expected to represent 25% of the older adult population by 2030, up from 16% in 1998. With the expected jump in this population, there is a need for mental health interventions that are effective for ethnic minority older adults. At present, members of ethnic minority groups are less inclined than whites to seek treatment, despite higher rates of poverty and greater health problems. In addition, there is an insufficient number of mental health professionals from ethnic minority groups, which leads to language barriers and inadequate services in mental health programs.

Delivery of Services to Older Adults in Community Settings

Older Americans under utilize mental health services. A number of individual and systemic barriers impede the provision of adequate mental health care to older persons. These include the stigma surrounding mental illness and mental health treatment; lack of outreach to older adults; denial; access barriers; fragmented and inadequate funding for mental health services; lack of collaboration and coordination among primary care, mental health, and aging services providers; gaps in services; and shortages in professional and paraprofessional staff trained in the provision of geriatric mental health services. While mental health services for older adults are provided in diverse settings, far greater emphasis should be placed on community-based care, provided in homes and in outpatient settings, and through community organizations.

Initiatives in Mental Health and Aging

A number of notable initiatives have been undertaken to address issues surrounding mental health services. Among these are

efforts to: encourage collaboration in the delivery of mental health and supportive services; organize consumer advocacy groups; increase public education of mental health issues; support research specific to older adults with mental health needs; and expand and better educate the geriatric mental health workforce. These efforts provide an excellent foundation for confronting critical challenges in mental health and aging.

Policy Recommendations

A national crisis in geriatric mental health care is emerging and policymakers, practitioners, and researchers are facing many challenges in meeting the needs of a diverse and growing aging population. Careful consideration must be given to confronting these challenges, especially in light of the expected increase of older adults in our population and their need for a wide range of mental health services. The crisis will require partnerships across service systems and disciplines to address the mental health needs of older adults.

n4a urges policymakers to:

- **Increase collaboration among mental health services providers and streamline federal, state and privately financed mental health services to coordinate and strengthen existing service and delivery systems;**
- **Promote prevention and early intervention measures that increase collaboration among acute and long-term care providers;**
- **Aggressively recruit and train geriatric mental health professional and paraprofessional personnel needed in the fields of medicine, mental health, and social services;**
- **Increase public awareness and education campaigns to reduce the stigma surrounding mental illness and the resulting underutilization of mental health services;**
- **Increase mental health and aging research to improve understanding of the biological, behavioral, social, and cultural factors related to mental illness, especially for at-risk and underserved populations;**
- **Encourage greater consumer advocacy and involvement in issues of access, range, and quality of mental health services that depend in large part on consumer and family involvement, participation, and advocacy; and**
- **Ensure that mental health professionals acquire adequate knowledge of the cultural background and values of the ethnic minorities they serve, which will enable them to determine the service approaches that best meet their mental health needs.**