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Peer Support Programs for the Elderly in Georgia

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“When I think about peer support, it means someone who has been through or is going through what I am about to go through and who knows the ins and the outs, the do’s and the don’ts, and they can help me and alleviate any misgivings I might have about making the move.”

-- Walton County Client

Introduction

In support of the Georgia Department of Human Resources’ 2002 Real Choice Systems Change Grant from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), the Georgia Health Policy Center examined the feasibility of establishing a peer support program for the elderly transitioning from institutional settings to community settings. The study concluded that a peer support program for the elderly could build on and strengthen Georgia’s existing, nationally recognized, peer support programs. The study also identified five important dimensions Georgia should consider before it implements a peer support program for the elderly.

Background

In 1999, the United States Supreme Court issued the *Olmstead v. L.C.* decision, affirming, per the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), unnecessary segregation of individuals in institutions may constitute discrimination based on disability. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) responded to the *Olmstead* decision, in part, by sponsoring the Real Choices System Change Grant program, which provides funding to support development of state programs for people with disabilities or long-term illness.

According to CMS, “These grants are intended to foster the systemic changes to enable children and adults of any age who have a disability or long-term illness to:

- Live in the most integrated community setting appropriate to their individual support requirements and their preferences;
- Exercise meaningful choices about their living environments, the providers of services they receive, the types of supports they use, and the manner by which services are provided; and
- Obtain quality services in a manner as consistent as possible with their community living preferences and priorities.”

The goals of Georgia’s 2002 Real Choice Systems Change Grant were defined by a stakeholder group including consumers, family members, representatives from state organizations, service providers, and advocacy groups. A transition program that builds upon a model peer support program was one of six project goals developed to support Georgia’s grant proposal. Georgia’s existing peer support projects are focused in four key areas:

- 1 Training peer support specialists within a hospital environment and improving support for peer support specialists,
- 2 Providing peer support for developmental disabilities,
- 3 Providing peer support for physical disabilities, and
- 4 Exploring the feasibility of peer support for the elderly.

Top Ranked Challenges:

Transitioning from Institutional to Community Living:

1. Finding Housing
2. Completing Paperwork
3. Arranging Services
4. Being Waitlisted
5. Navigating Financial Problems

The Study

Interviews conducted with individuals who had already made the transition from institutional to community living are among the most valuable aspects of the study. Staff of Georgia's Centers for Independent Living interviewed 43 individuals who made a transition in 2004. Of those interviewed, the average age was 53, and the median age was 54. Forty-four percent were female. The average number of months that elapsed from the time they decided to transition to the time they actually transitioned was seven, and the median was four.

"The main thing was getting out from over there – just getting housing."

-- Decatur County Client

The number one challenge in making a transition was finding affordable and accessible housing, followed by completing paperwork, arranging services, being placed on a waitlist for services, and general financial difficulties.

Ninety-eight percent of those asked said they would be willing to serve as a peer support specialist for the elderly if Georgia created such a program. Many are very enthusiastic in their eagerness to participate, including those 80 years old and older. When asked what type of assistance they thought they could provide from their own experiences, interviewees listed the following:

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|-------------------------------------|----|
| • Shared experience: | 15 |
| • Information and referral: | 13 |
| • Support; counseling: | 8 |
| • Help with paperwork and ID cards: | 3 |
| • A place to live: | 2 |

In addition to interviews with those who had already transitioned, a Stakeholder Advisory Group convened to determine the program's feasibility. The process was designed to be iterative, and a decision matrix was developed to explore the following dimensions: peer definition, program model, possible funding, program structure, and need. After several months of literature review, interviews with other state officials, and reviews of best practices, the Stakeholder Advisory Group identified the following five dimensions Georgia should consider before it implements a peer support program for the elderly:

- **Peer Definition:** A Peer Support Specialist for the elderly should be age 60 or older, and age will not be a restriction as long as the candidate has the minimum of a shared experience of completing a nursing facility transition.

- **Model:** Peer support programs for the elderly should be staffed by paid, trained, and certified Peer Support Specialists.

- **Funding:** Peer support programs for the elderly should not be created until sustainable funding is secured for such a purpose. Funding peer support through Medicaid as a form of care coordination should be explored further.

- **Structure:** A peer support program for the elderly should be incorporated into an existing state program with statewide coverage. It should not be a stand-alone 501(C)(3).

- **Need:** There is sufficient need for a peer support program targeted to elderly individuals. Peer Support Specialists would serve as information providers, friendly visitors, problem solvers, and a resource when the individual who has transitioned has questions that need to be resolved.

"It would make me happy if I could just get one person to come out like I did, to let them see how it feels to be back out in the community with other people. Being out in the community gives me a sense of belonging, not just being by myself."

-- Richmond County Client

Conclusion

Georgia has a proven track record with peer support, especially with the Office of Consumer Relations' Certified Peer Support Specialist Project. A peer support program for the elderly could build on what is already in place in Georgia and take advantage of lessons already learned. The study's Advisory Group emphasized that in addition to partnering with an existing program, a peer support program for the elderly should be piloted first in one community. The benefits would likely outweigh the costs, especially as Georgia continues to adapt to the dictates of the Olmstead decision.