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Rural Health & Disability

Tom Seekins Ph.D.

University of Montana Rural Institute - Research and Training Center on Disability in Rural Communities

University of Montana Rural Institute

scholarworks-reports@mso.umt.edu

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Ruralfacts

Rural Health & Disability

The health of many people with disabilities living in rural areas is not as good as one might expect. While people with disabilities can lead healthy and independent lives, they often lack access to health care providers who understand their needs, and lack access to services that would support their efforts to live independently. ^{1,2,3,4}

Our research shows a self-help health promotion model can be effective in addressing these issues for some people in rural communities, significantly improving health and reducing medical service utilization:

1. People with disabilities living in rural areas experience an average of 14 secondary conditions each year. ⁵ Secondary conditions include problems such as pressure sores, physical de-conditioning, poor nutrition, urinary tract infections, depression and pain.
2. Secondary conditions and other health problems experienced by people with disabilities are costly. Fifteen percent (15%) of people with disabilities living in the community account for 29% of all physician visits and 40% of all hospitalizations. ⁶
3. The health problems experienced by people with disabilities are complex. Our research shows that these health problems (e.g. secondary conditions) interact with one another and are related to a person's overall health orientation. ⁷
4. Secondary conditions can be managed and prevented. Proper education and support delivered by independent living centers can dramatically improve the health of adults with disabilities by an average of 37%, and can significantly reduce medical service utilization. ^{8,9}
5. More research is needed to develop effective models for promoting health of people with disabilities. There is some general agreement among professionals about factors that might increase risk for secondary conditions but there are relatively few data to support these beliefs. Even for the general population, programs for maintaining healthy lifestyles are far from well understood. A clearer understanding for this population is critical.

6. Rehabilitation and other service providers should include screening for secondary conditions as part of their ongoing services. Our research has produced a three-item instrument that can correctly identify 80% of those at high-risk for secondary conditions. Early detection and proper referral might significantly improve outcome.¹⁰
7. As Medicaid and Medicare programs evolve, they should include provisions for health promotion and maintenance services. Currently, these programs only pay for treatment once health problems occur but won't target high-risk populations for prevention efforts that could save money and maintain a healthier population.
8. Private Insurance programs and employers should also develop health promotion services designed to maintain the health of persons with disabilities and to prevent secondary conditions.
9. Rural health research centers and rural health networks should include issues of disability health in their programs. The declining quality of rural health care has particularly dramatic effects on this population.
10. Independent Living Centers (ILCs) should be reimbursed for providing these services by Medicaid and other third-party payors.¹¹

Cost Benefit of Health Promotion from The Montana/Kansas Study

We used outcome data from our research⁹ to compare projected costs of medical services accrued over 20 months under the standard "acute care model" and a "health promotion model." The health promotion model includes an eight session workshop led by independent living center (ILC) staff. The sessions focus on topics including goal setting, problem solving, adopting a hopeful and optimistic attitude, and overcoming depression. In addition, a number of specific behavioral repertoires are taught, including communication skills, medical information-seeking skills, changing one's nutritional intake and level of physical activity, and an introduction to advocacy skills.

After six months our health promotion intervention led to a 37% improvement in secondary conditions and a 45% reduction in physician visits. 9 Assuming an average cost of \$75 per visit, we project the participants in our study as a group would spend approximately \$24,000 under the acute care model, and approximately \$8,000 with a health promotion intervention.

Savings from a health promotion approach can be used to provide more services to the same population, the same services over a longer period of time or to more people, or to maintain a level of services in the face of cutbacks. Reimbursing ILCs for providing consumer-directed health promotion services also provides a mechanism for expanding IL services to unserved rural areas.

Check Your Health

Our research has produced a brief screening instrument of three items that can accurately identify nearly 80% of those at risk for secondary conditions. The manual for this screening instrument, Check Your Health, is available. The manual outlines winning strategies consumers can use to respond to health problems.

1. Overall, would you say your health over the past 12 months was:

___ Excellent	___ Good	___ Fair	___ Poor
3	2	1	0

2. Overall, would you say that your ability to INDEPENDENTLY engage in desired activities such as work, recreation, or daily living over the past 12 months was:

___ Excellent	___ Good	___ Fair	___ Poor
3	2	1	0

3. During the past year, how much would you say that depression limited your activity per week? (Depression is more than feeling blue.

Symptoms of depression include extreme long-term sadness, loss of pleasure in favorite things

and activities, sleep problems, weight loss or gain, thoughts of suicide or crying.)

__ 0 Hrs __ 1-5 Hrs __ 6-10 Hrs __ 11+ Hrs
 3 2 1 0

Total your score for the preceding questions. (If you score 5-9 points, you're probably doing well. If you score 0-3 points, you should obtain assistance.)

A Sample of Some Winning Strategies

Seek Support or Services from Others or Get Referrals:

For Environmental Obstacles: Talk to someone at an ILC (Independent Living Center), a Voc. Rehab. counselor or a Public Health Service provider.

For Psycho-Social Issues: Support groups, ministers, ILC staff, Voc. Rehab. counselors, mental health centers, physicians or psychologists are likely to be able to assist you.

For Medical Conditions: See your family physician or a physiatrist, who specializes in medical problems related to disability.

Lifestyle Challenges: Ask service providers (ILCs, PVA chapters, etc.), about wellness programs tailored to people with disabilities. Also try other programs such as Weight Watchers, and consider joining a health or wellness program.

Educate Yourself

There are extensive materials you can read and videos about disabilities and health maintenance strategies. Check with your local library or service providers, (e.g. physicians, ILCs, Voc. Rehab. counselors, public and mental health centers). Also try the many electronic bulletin boards by

"surfing" the Internet. If you're unfamiliar with the Internet, ask a friend who can help you search for topics and discussion groups of interest. There are hundreds of them.

Resources for Managing Secondary Conditions available from The University of Montana Rural Institute

Check Your Health: Health screening for adults with disabilities related to physical impairments.

Living Well with a Disability: A Workbook for Promoting Health and Wellness

Consumer Reporting Form: A surveillance instrument of secondary conditions.

Risk Assessment: Lifestyle and secondary conditions

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Prepared by:

Tom Seekins

For additional information please contact:

Research and Training Center on Disability in Rural Communities

The University of Montana Rural Institute
52 Corbin Hall, Missoula, MT 59812-7056
888-268-2743

406-246-5467

406-243-2349 (Fax);

<http://rtc.ruralinstitute.umt.edu>

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