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Testimony to Joint Committee on Aging

NAMI Texas is a nonprofit 501(c)3 organization founded by volunteers in 1984. We are part of the nation's largest grassroots mental health organizations and we exist to help improve the quality of life for individuals with mental illness and their families. Around the state, we have 30 local NAMI affiliate organizations and approximately 2,000 members.

Prevalence of Mental Health Disorders

Mental health issues are often overlooked in older adults. More than one fifth of Texans over age 60 have a neurological or mental disorder, often depression or dementia, and up to 20 percent of older adults abuse some type of substance. Older adults may face challenges such as limited mobility, chronic diseases, financial stressors, and loss of independence that increase their likelihood of developing depression or anxiety.

Impact

Untreated mental health issues have serious consequences for older adults. Mental health conditions increase the risk of medical illness and cognitive decline. Adults over age 65 with mental health conditions like depression pay higher costs for physical health conditions.

Approximately 400 older Texans die by suicide every year. A quarter of those who die by suicide had disclosed to their suicidal intent to someone, mostly family members, prior to their death. In addition to mental health conditions, physical health issues often precede suicide, as the individual may struggle to cope with the conditions they are experiencing and may not understand their other options. These deaths are preventable.

Mental health issues like depression are treatable in 80 percent of cases in older adult populations. However, older adults often experience diagnostic overshadowing, where their physical health needs are prioritized by health care providers and their mental health needs may be overlooked. Early detection and treatment are crucial to prevent mental health conditions from causing further health issues.

Reducing barriers to mental health care: transportation

NAMI Texas recommends Texas ensure older adults have access to mental health care. Ensuring access to transportation to and from appointments for older adults is one major step to treat mental health conditions. Nearly 40 percent of women over age 75 do not drive. For older adults, no longer driving can contribute to mental health issues such as depression, social isolation, and cause deterioration of other cognitive abilities. Approximately 3.6 million adults in the United States cite transportation as a major obstacle to accessing medical care. Without assistance with transportation, these older adults may remain isolated and go without necessary mental health treatment.

Covering non-emergency medical transportation (NEMT) saves Texas money in the long run by helping older adults in need access regularly scheduled, non-emergency mental and physical health services. This leads to fewer missed appointments, shorter hospital stays, and fewer emergency room visits. Without the assistance, older adults with chronic health needs may become more ill and need more expensive care, including hospitalization or placement in an institution. Texas needs to ensure adults on Medicare and Medicaid can access adequate non-emergency medical transportation. The state NEMT program lost almost 60 percent of its Medicaid users between 2011 and 2017, causing the program to cover 200,000 fewer users while costing the state \$316 million more. Texas needs to ensure adequate transportation coverage for low-income older Texans in need to prevent major health issues in the future.

Telehealth

Another way to increase access to mental health services, specifically for older adults, involves greater investment in telemental health services, especially in rural or other underserved areas or for older adults with mobility issues. Telehealth is the use of long-distance communication channels and information technology to provide health services, including health assessments, diagnosis, information, intervention, consultation, and education. Telehealth has been shown to be effective in reducing hospitalization rates and improving adherence to medications. Telehealth services can help older adults overcome mobility or access challenges by bringing services closer to them.

Collaborative Care Model

Since older adults are more likely to experience diagnostic overshadowing, the collaborative care model can help ensure both the mental and physical treatment needs of an older adult are being met by health professionals. The collaborative care model uses a multi-disciplinary team of primary care and specialty care providers, including mental health professionals, to provide specialized care to a defined population of patients. The team uses systematic, disease-specific, and patient-reported outcome measures to drive clinical decision-making and evidence-based treatments that are individually tailored to each patient to improve health outcomes.

The collaborative care model has been proven to reduce depressive symptoms and increase adherence to treatment. Collaborative care can ensure older adults receive treatment for their physical health needs, including pain management, as well as their mental health and emotional support needs.

Peer Support

Collaborative care teams should also include peer support programming. Many of these older adults may be reluctant to seek out care or understand their mental health condition. Peer support services are delivered to a person with a serious mental illness or co-occurring mental and substance use disorders by a person in recovery. This specialized assistance offers social support before, during, and after treatment to facilitate long-term recovery in the community. Peer support can help older adults with mental health conditions understand their condition, access treatment, reduce social isolation, and strengthen social support networks.

Conclusion

Health care funding for older adults in Texas needs to focus on accessibility and effectively addressing co-occurring physical and mental health needs. Texas needs to ensure that older adults are able to attend their behavioral health appointments, either through telemental health services or through transportation services. Texas also needs to ensure older adults are being adequately diagnosed and treated for mental health conditions in the settings they already regularly visit for other medical needs, and that they have supports in place to help them navigate the process.

Sources

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