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Senior Health Independence Promotion Program (SHIP): A Collaboration Between the Philadelphia Senior Center and the Jefferson Health System

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Senior Health Independence Promotion Program (SHIP): A Collaboration Between the Philadelphia Senior Center and the Jefferson Health Center

As America continues to age, new models of care to meet the needs of our elderly citizens and their families become increasingly important. Few seniors wish to accept permanent institutionalization¹, and it may be possible to delay frailty with early intervention among even well-functioning community-dwelling elderly². However, the current fragmented nature of our health and social service delivery systems can be a barrier to successful aging. When additional challenges of frailty and poverty enter the equation, seniors may be forced to accept institutionalization or suboptimal quality of life as the only alternative. The Philadelphia Senior Center (PSC) and Jefferson Health System (JHS) have partnered to develop a new, community-based model addressing many of these barriers.

Previous work by the Jefferson Department of Nursing demonstrated significant unmet health care needs among the residents of eight subsidized housing units served by PSC³. In addition, PSC staff are aware of a substantial number of clients who seldom or never leave their apartments for medical care or other activities. Independent experience of both PSC and the Department of Family Medicine at Jefferson have confirmed the need for a strong partnership between health and social service providers to facilitate truly seamless access to the wide range of services available to maximize the function, health, and quality of life of seniors.

JHS and PSC have designed and piloted a fully integrated model of delivering health and social services to frail Philadelphians, many of whom are home-bound or live in subsidized senior housing units. JHS, through the Office of Senior Services, provided support for the initial pilot phase of the Senior Health Independence Promotion Program (SHIP). The Department of Family Medicine has recently received additional funding from the Pew Charitable Trusts to fully implement the first phase of the SHIP in three subsidized senior housing buildings served by PSC social services.

The centerpiece of the SHIP model is a highly functional interdisciplinary team, including social workers, senior center administration, geriatricians, advanced practice nurses, community health nurses and educators, and community members. This team provides project coordination, as well as promoting increased understanding and collaboration among disciplines and institutions. SHIP aims to improve the health and quality of life of each participant, through activities as diverse as health education and screening, exercise classes, social stimulation, financial management services, nursing interventions, and in-home primary care. Individuals identified by program staff as being at high risk for losing their current housing situation receive more intense, one-on-one services. The ultimate goal of the SHIP is to improve the quality of life of all seniors served by PSC, through more effective coordination of existing community resources. As the model matures and is expanded into additional housing sites and the senior center itself, we anticipate that the overall health, independence, and quality of life of all clients will be improved.

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