Self-Management Support: Community Support

Chronic conditions place demands on patients, families, and providers, often pushing us beyond the resources immediately available to us. Most communities have resources that can bridge these gaps and help providers and patients do a better job. At the same time, communities (including our patients' homes) may also have crying needs which health care providers can help ameliorate.

- Identify Community Programs (and other resources) – Find what is out there and what they do. Use patients, staff, government agencies, and others to help you connect.

- Connect with Community Groups – Connect and build relationships with community groups - gyms, schools, employers, faith communities, businesses, community centers, senior centers and other programs can be ongoing sources of support for your patients. And this can raise your profile in the community. Personal, and reasonably sustained contact with these groups is key to collaborations that can help everyone.

- Raise Community Awareness – Libraries, churches, schools, and others can partner with you to amplify health education messages. When providers become active members of their community, patients are more likely to hear the same message consistently and less likely to “fall through the cracks.”

Community-based organizations (CBOs) can help patients find needed emotional and practical help with everything from buying food to exercise to finding support groups. Many community-based organizations routinely help people self-manage. With some planning, CBOs can support your patients in many ways that will improve their quality of life (e.g., housing, stress reduction, domestic violence counseling, home health aides, etc.) and ultimately enhance the care you provide.

The National Council on Aging points out that “CBO staff members are often aware of clinically relevant issues around living situations and networks of social support. When older adults have multiple health problems, just keeping up with what they need to do can be overwhelming. They may not know about help they could get with day-to-day living unless their doctor hands them a phone number that links them to a community agency that is ready to help.”

New Health Partnerships
Institute for Healthcare Improvement, 2009
You can go as far as you want down this road. As with other elements of self-management support, physicians do not have to do all the work — other clinic staff members, volunteers, and patient or family members can do a great deal of the legwork.

**Identify Helpful Community Programs**

The first step in connecting your patients to good community support programs is to identify what is available. To learn who is out there and what they do, seek assistance from patients and family, staff, government agencies, hospital social service departments, Area Agency on Aging organizations and similar groups.

**Who Can Do This?**

Remember, it is not necessary for the physician or nurse in a practice to lead this effort. Volunteers, office managers, or receptionists may be glad to take on this project.

**Strategies for Finding Resources**

- **Ask patients**, families, and staff who live in the community what programs they know about that address specific problems and needs (e.g., food, exercise programs, respite care). And ask them if they know other people who might have some good information.

- **Tour the neighborhood.** Ask patients or staff who live in a neighborhood you serve if they would be willing to lead you on a tour of that neighborhood. As you tour, ask them and/or those you meet along the way, what problems people with chronic conditions in this neighborhood typically face or typically find most troubling? What resources do people facing these problems find most helpful?

- **Look in the Yellow Pages under “Social and Human Services.”** To start, you might just want to call two or three organizations that seem most likely to be able to meet the needs of your patients.

- **Check with your local hospital Social Service Department and Department of Public Health.** Local Area Agency on Aging groups offer a wealth of services and programs. Visit [http://www.fullcirclecare.org](http://www.fullcirclecare.org) for an easy to use nationwide directory to find agencies serving your area.

One resource in your community, perhaps a heart, asthma or diabetes association, can often tell you about other resources and help you keep information about them current. Ask if they will send you regular updates.
Additional Tips on Finding Community Resources

- Programs change and go out of business frequently, so lists go out of date. It’s good to review your list with phone calls, as often as volunteer or paid staffing allows.
- The Social Service department of a local hospital usually has useful lists they are willing to share with affiliated practices. In such instances the updating may be automatic.
- A long journey starts with one step. You might start by contacting a leader from an organization you know, or who has been recommended by other knowledgeable people. Ask about:
  - Specific services of the organization
  - Eligibility criteria and fees for those services
  - Current waiting times for services
  - Languages spoken by the organization’s staff
  - How physicians can make referrals to the organization
  - Who should not be referred to this organization

Make This Information Available to Patients

Once you have identified services appropriate for your patients and their families you’ll want to share this information in a way that is useful to them. Patients and families look to providers for referrals to helpful community resources and appreciate them.

- Lists of community resources can be offered to patients as handouts.
- Lists can also be made available on a practice, network or system web site, if you have one.
  - See the Palo Alto Medical Foundation site for a good example: http://www.pamf.org/catalog/supportgroups.cfm
- Posters provided by the CBO, in waiting rooms or exam rooms, can give patients and families ideas and contact information.
- Print information about a particularly helpful referral you find yourself making repeatedly on a 3x5 card or bookmark and hand to appropriate patients during clinical visits.
- Some practices are experimenting with "prescribing" or making referrals to community-based programs and services.
  - You can have simple referral forms readily available.
  - Patients are more likely to check out a resource you have personally referred them to.
Tips for Success

- Identify liaisons at the CBO: It can be helpful to have the name of a designated person at an organization who has agreed to be a direct contact for your patients. Individuals will often feel more comfortable if they have a specific person to contact.
- Likewise, identify a CBO-liaison at your practice: It is helpful for community organizations to have a contact designated at your site.
- Keep in touch with your contact person at key CBOs. Contact key CBOs once or twice a year to learn about new programs and/or staff turnover.

If desired, you can go beyond referring and informing individual patients. You can partner with CBOs on programs and mutual support.

Partner with Community-Based Organizations

In addition to referring patients, consider connecting and building a working relationship with a particular community organization. You may be able to help each other in many ways — raising awareness of each other, participating in community health events, or finding mutual support in dealing with bureaucracies are just a few. Here are a couple of strategies:

- **Network with organizations**: Invite community leaders to meetings with health care providers to informally discuss existing programs and community health needs that are underserved or not addressed at all. Provide opportunities for all to share what they do and how they might be able to help one another. Ask what they consider the most significant unmet health needs. They'll appreciate being asked and you, and other providers, will likely find their answers illuminating.
- **Let synergy work for you**: When partnerships begin, a natural next step can be to collaborate on activities like education, screening, or activity (exercise) promotion. When health care systems and community organizations collaborate they can enhance access to services and reinforce important messages.

The National Council on the Aging has published an informative booklet on the subject of making community partnerships work at their site. See [Partnering Physicians with Community Organizations](#) at their site.

Tip

New Health Partnerships
Institute for Healthcare Improvement, 2009
Your patients and their family members are often the best entrée into community organizations. If they are a member of a church, a parent at a school, an employee or a customer of a local business, they might be happy to help you encourage these agencies to work with you to promote healthy living.

**More Resources**

**Family Voices**
Family Voices aims to achieve family-centered care for all children and youth with special health care needs and/or disabilities. There is a downloadable brief on families partnering with researchers to improve services for children with special health care needs. In addition there are some helpful resources for parents pursuing leadership roles.

**Healing Well**
HealingWell.com is an on-line community and information resource for patients, caregivers, and families coping with diseases, disorders and chronic illnesses and dedicated to people on their way to "healing well." The website offers health resources, interactive tools, and community support to help individuals to take control of their illness and start managing their health. The site features health articles, doctor-produced video web casts, community message boards and chat rooms, professional healthcare resources, and resource link directories.

**Healthy Aging Toolkit**
The purpose of this toolkit is to guide a physician champion in educating his/her colleagues about the benefits and practicalities of collaborating with community-based organizations that serve older adults.

**Integrated Care Management Initiative**
This report identifies and reviews partnerships between healthcare providers and community organizations. Commissioned by the US Administration on Aging and prepared by the National Council on Aging (NCOA), the report evaluates an initiative designed to strengthen partnerships between community-based aging services and health care providers. Lessons learned are generally applicable for those interested in community-provider partnerships. See also the toolkit produced by NCOA.