

'Programs For People' chooses health

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LOCAL VIEW

Very often we hear the term "treating the whole patient" used regarding best practices and ideals that those in the medical profession would like to strive for.

Unfortunately sometimes there are obstacles in the health care system that make this impractical if not impossible. There is now the advent of concierge medicine, which makes the concept easier; that is only for a financially privileged few who can pay thousands of dollars just to have a doctor available to them at whim and for extended visits and phone calls that go far beyond anything that would be reimbursed by an insurance provider.

This is why it is so refreshing to find a health care program for low-income individuals that despite extremely limited funding, strives for and achieves many of the ideals of treating the whole person.

Programs For People is an independent, self-supporting mental health agency founded in Framingham in 1973 to enable adults recovering from mental illness to achieve success in life. Its services are comprehensively designed to teach coping skills, promote symptom relief, build healthy relationships with family and friends, and to assist clients to obtain, and maintain employment.

Its day treatment program, Framingham Day Hospital, is a pro-active program that can prevent in-patient hospitalization, shorten the stays of those who do require it, and help those living in the community to gain and maintain independence. Since the agency relies primarily upon reimbursement from Medicaid to support its day treatment services, Programs For People's novel approach that integrates wellness education and focuses on the whole person delivers far more health care than is expected or required. The agency has always strived to treat the person and not just their mental

health condition. Fortunately, the agency received a \$1,450 "Catalyst Fund Grant" from the Blue Cross Blue Shield Foundation of Massachusetts and a \$750 grant from the Framingham Union Aid Association, Inc. to assist with their wellness initiative, "Choose Health."

Many people with mental health problems rely upon medications that cause them to gain weight. So in addition to the same factors everyone else in society faces that are creating unhealthy weights which can lead to diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, cancer and joint ailments, these folks have additional contributing factors that are impossible to avoid and further compound the situation.

Anyone who has spent any time studying obesity and overweight knows that lifestyle and choices play a very important role in preventing, reversing, and mitigating weight problems. Programs For People, despite its very limited resources, undertook an initiative a year ago to counter the effects of obesity, sedentary lifestyle, and client medication side-effects in order to help the people they serve to succeed at living healthier lives despite the hurdles they face.

As we know, lifestyle changes and eating habits are very difficult to change for the general population – the rate of failure and stopping participation is high for everyone in these types of programs.

Holistic nurse, Linda Chiofar, a PFP staff member, expected some resistance to the initial idea of the program and was pragmatic enough to suggest that goals and changes be attempted in small, manageable increments so that the prospects wouldn't be as daunting and the experience of success could inspire clients to set larger goals for healthy change.

The threat of Type II diabetes among this population is very high; education is the first step toward prevention and that has been a cornerstone of the program. Learning that they could impact their own health outcomes gave members of this vulnerable population a sense of empowerment that they don't get to experience often enough. This side-effect of the effort has helped the program achieve the successes that it has to date.

Clients are bringing home their newfound health knowledge to their families and are sharing their successes with other agency clients who have since asked to join the program. Even staff members have caught the Choose Health bug.

The agency's onsite, vocational "Lunch Box" program now offers healthier fare, clients and staff members look forward to long walks at lunchtime, exercise classes are held, and people are feeling better physically, mentally and most importantly are feeling better about themselves.

Client comments about the impact of the program include, "I try to eat slower and avoid second helpings," "walked two miles on Saturday," "changed from sodas to drinking more water," "took a power walk to ground myself," "kept in touch with friends on a lonely weekend," "slept late," "going to quit buying hot dogs and sausages and eat more veggies and salads," "ate 3 square meals 4 days in a row," and "I finally got the courage to ride a bicycle and not fall off after 25 years."

Participants are now even keeping food and activity journals to document their successes and discover where they can make improvements.

After 38 years, Programs For People is still a small agency making a big impact on the lives of the people it serves.

Cheryl Tully Stoll of Framingham is on the board of Programs For People.