

Volunteers 'Link' Cancer Patients to Psychosocial Support Services

Summary

St. Joseph Mercy Health System, Ann Arbor (SJM), American Cancer Society (ACS) and Cancer Support Community (CSC) had a partnership to provide psychosocial support. ACS and CSC ran volunteer training and offered support but were not on-site to oversee the program. The result was inconsistent volunteer recruitment, retention and support.

The Program Coordinator (PC) was essential in developing the "Link" program to enrich the existing program. Prior to the Link program only 15 SJM cancer patients were referred for resources each month. This number grew steadily to a high of 118 patients per month.

Challenge

The Institute of Medicine (IOM) suggests that psychosocial care should be a core of every cancer patient's treatment plan as evidence suggests psychosocial care improves health outcomes. SJM identified only a small fraction of patients were being referred and/or using available psychosocial support services.

SJM, ACS and CSC have used volunteers since 2010 to help with psychosocial referrals. Due to competing work responsibilities this program did not have the structure and support it needed. In the months prior to the "Link project" volunteers referred only 8% of SJM cancer patients for psychosocial resources.

The primary goal of the Link project is to increase the number of patients receiving psychosocial resource information. Our secondary goal is to increase support to link volunteers to increase their impact on the lives of cancer patients.

"At the Cancer Support Community, we support patients, survivors, and their families from the moment of diagnosis throughout their cancer experience. It is heart breaking when a newcomer walks through our doors and says "I only wish I'd known you were here sooner." The Link Program has had an incredible impact in reaching people earlier and more often to help us ensure that no one faces cancer alone. We are so very grateful to the Link Volunteers.

**- Rosie Morrison, Cancer Support Community
of Greater Ann Arbor Program Director**

Solution

A Masters level social worker serves as PC. The PC recruits and coordinates volunteers and organizes volunteer training. SJM's electronic medical record includes psychosocial resource referral. SJM can monitor the number of patients receiving or declining psychosocial resource information. Volunteers meet patients in waiting rooms and the front desk of the cancer center. Patients interested in psychosocial resources fill out a referral form. The form is sent to ACS and CSC to make direct telephone contact to provide psychosocial resources.

SJM, CSC, and ACS collaborate on volunteer training, assessment of volunteer recruitment, monthly volunteer 'coffee chats' and maintaining resource information.

Success Stories

<http://nccd.cdc.gov/nccdsuccessstories/>

Results

The Link project yielded significantly positive results. The PC was able to develop infrastructure for the program, focus on volunteer recruitment and provide support and training to volunteers. In November and December of 2014, 11 and 14 referral forms were completed. Beginning in January, volunteers began to track not only the referral forms completed but every contact made with cancer patients. This gave the Link coordinator a more accurate picture of the number of patients touched. In January the count was 73, February 118, March 105, with numbers rising well above the goal. Staff turnover resulted in the referral numbers returned to being under goal – July being 25. With the hiring of the new PC referral numbers continued on the expected trend from 40 in her first month (August), 99 in September, and 102 in October, with contact expected to continue to rise as program coordinator has recruited and trained 11 new volunteers.

Sustainable Success

In its first year, the Link program reached its goal of increasing psychosocial referrals. The PC position appears to be a key to this success. Along with providing support to volunteers, the PC developed program manuals and processes to help the program to run smoothly. Next year the program will expand into three additional SJMH locations.

Patients will be given opportunity to self-refer by placement of referral forms in other areas in the hospital where cancer patients may be diagnosed or treated. In order to continue to reach more and more of the patient population, PC will incorporate a cultural competency piece in the training to equip volunteers with the tools and competence to serve patients of all backgrounds.

In order to help with volunteer retention, the PC will check in with all volunteers to hear their concerns and ensure that the work they are doing is meeting their needs.

Your Involvement is Key

The core value behind the Link project is that patients and caregivers have a right to know what psychosocial resources are available to them. Patients often share a wish that they had known about the psychosocial resources available sooner after diagnosis. The Link project arms volunteers with the tools they need to bring free psychosocial resources to patients and caregivers. The Institute of Medicine suggests that psychosocial care is not just a nice addition to medical treatment for cancer – it needs to be an important, prioritized core element of cancer treatment.



Contact

Jordan Cusumano, LLMSW
St. Joseph Mercy Health System, Ann Arbor
501 N Maple Rd
Ann Arbor, MI 48103
734-712-3113 phone



This publication was supported in part by funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Cooperative Agreement U58DP003921. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the CDC.