

Spotlight on the Safety Net

*A Community Collaboration
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Senior PharmAssist

Healthy aging should include informed and proper use of medications. Senior PharmAssist has been helping Durham older adults with that goal for over 14 years. The program grew out of a task force of the Durham County Hospital Corporation that performed a community needs assessment and feasibility study for a pharmaceutical assistance program for senior adults in 1992. The group found financial access to medication for seniors with limited incomes and polypharmacy—the use of multiple, sometimes unnecessary medications—as the major public health issues that needed to be addressed. Senior PharmAssist was created to address those needs and began serving patients in 1994, becoming an independent organization in 1998.

The mission of Senior PharmAssist is to promote healthier living for Durham seniors by helping them obtain and better manage medications and by providing health education, community referral, and advocacy. The program provides seniors with the assistance and information they need to empower themselves to become wiser consumers and active participants in the maintenance of their own well-being, helping older adults lead healthier, more independent lives. This mission is accomplished by providing combined medication access with medication therapy management to ensure that program participants are receiving the medicines they need and avoiding those they don't. In FY 2008 (July 1, 2007 – June 30, 2008), Senior PharmAssist provided one-on-one assistance to 1,082 people, either by direct financial assistance through a prescription card program for Durham seniors with limited means or by helping seniors maximize other sources of medication assistance.

Prior to Medicare Part D, Senior PharmAssist served as a primary payer in providing financial assistance to Durham seniors aged 65 and older. Participants had incomes up to 150% of the federal poverty level, limited cash assets, and no prescription coverage. In late 2003, the Medicare Prescription Drug Improvement and Modernization Act authorized Medicare to provide some medication coverage. In January 2006, Medicare introduced new voluntary benefits projected to save the average beneficiary 37% of drug costs. These programs are often complicated and confusing in their benefit structure and involve significant cost-sharing requirements and diminishing prescription assistance from other sources. In North Carolina, many older adults lost an additional source of medication assistance when NC Senior Care, which had provided an annual \$600 drug benefit for seniors up to 250% of the federal poverty guidelines, ceased operations in 2006. In response to these changes, Senior PharmAssist now provides supplemental drug coverage to Durham County residents aged 60 and older who have incomes at or below 200% of the federal poverty guidelines (currently \$1,733 per month for single individuals and \$2,333 per month for couples) and who have Medicare drug plans but do not qualify for the federal government's full low-income subsidy. The program also helps those aged 60 or older who have no prescription drug coverage but meet the aforementioned guidelines by providing primary coverage for their needed medicines.

Senior PharmAssist participants who receive financial assistance also receive other benefits. Every 6 months they meet with a pharmacist one-on-one for medication therapy management, to review each medication they are taking (including prescription, over-the-counter, and herbal), and to assess whether the participant can properly perform tasks such as drawing up insulin, using an inhaler, and administering eye drops. They also discuss various health promotion strategies and make referrals to other relevant programs, such as medical transportation, home-delivered meals, and senior centers. One of the most important referrals is partial Medicaid, which helps Medicare-eligible individuals pay for their Medicare Part B premium, potentially saving them over \$1,000 per year. Senior PharmAssist also has a geriatric formulary—a list of medications that are approved for reimbursement. Program participants can use Senior PharmAssist's prescription card at any Durham pharmacy to pay just \$3 for generics and \$6 for brand name medications.

Senior PharmAssist is committed to helping its community by serving as a resource for Durham residents with pharmaceutical program applications, medication therapy management, and as a point of access for other community services. The full-time staff includes the executive director, clinical services director, community services director, development and communications director, and prescription assistance coordinator. In addition to the staff and board of directors, volunteers and graduate students (primarily pharmacy students) donated 2,703 hours of their time and expertise to further the mission during the last fiscal year.

Senior PharmAssist follows up with participants through evaluations every 6 months, which demonstrate improved outcomes, including reduced hospitalizations and emergency room visits and high levels of participant satisfaction. These evaluations and other information about the program have been published in the *North Carolina Medical Journal*¹ and the *American Journal of Health System Pharmacy*² and have also been presented at the annual meeting of the American Public Health Association. Senior PharmAssist and its staff have also won numerous community, state, and national awards, including most recently, the North Carolina Health and Wellness Trust Fund's Power of Prevention Award for Advocacy and Public Policy. The program is well loved by its participants who say, "you couldn't ask for a better group of people" and "they are just like family."

Senior PharmAssist serves as a success story for healthy aging and is also assisting communities interested in helping their seniors with medications through their manual, "A Guide for Implementing a Community-Based Pharmaceutical Assistance Program." For more information, visit their website www.seniorpharmassist.org.

REFERENCES

- 1 Upchurch GA, Earp JAL, Blalock SJ. Access to medications for low-income North Carolina citizens: without funds, how can they follow doctor's orders? *NC Med J*. 1994;55(5):173-177.
- 2 Smith SR, Catellier DJ, Conslick EA, Upchurch GA. Effect of health outcomes of a community-based medication therapy management program for seniors with limited incomes. *Am J Health Syst Pharm*. 2006;63(4):372-379.

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