

Health Navigators Helping Seniors



by Nancy King

Southeast Health Group has been employing Health Navigators since late 2012 to help Prowers County residents navigate the world of healthcare and social services. “Seniors who work with our Health Navigators have done especially well,” said Jackie Brown, Director of Integrated Care for Southeast Health Group. “We have seen the most dramatic cost reductions among Medicare patients when they get the right care at the right time and place.”

“We understand that seniors want to maintain their independence,” said Brown, who has served Prowers County as a nurse, Family Nurse Practitioner and Director of Public Health. “Joining forces with a Health Navigator doesn’t take away your independence—it actually helps you stay independent by having a buddy you can call whose mission is to keep you healthy.” Health Navigators provide a range of services from scheduling and attending medical appointments, to transporting to specialty care, to helping you access community resources, such as food or housing.

Results of a survey administered to 40 patients receiving Health Navigation services in 2013 and 2014 showed that patients have an overall positive and trusting relationship with their Health Navigators in the Prowers County program. Results also indicated that Health Navigators play a significant role in communication between the primary and specialty providers and the patient. “Oftentimes patients don’t understand what a doctor or specialist is telling them, but they are too embarrassed to ask,” said Brown. “The Health Navigator is able to attend appointments with patients to facilitate communication between the patients and providers, and will call later

to check on patients to see if they have more questions.”

“The other thing we see is that Primary Care Physicians don’t really have the time to teach people how to manage a chronic health condition, like diabetes or asthma,” said Brown. “It takes

patience and repetition to help people get into the habit of self-monitoring these conditions. Health Navigators have the time and expertise to help people develop a self-monitoring plan so they know when it’s the right time to call the doctor or go to the emergency room. We have seen Medicare emergency room visits level out in Prowers County over the past year.” Sometimes the problem keeping a person from accessing health care is a simple one—lack of transportation. “Our Health Navigator Team drove 5,697 miles last month alone, to help get people to their specialist appointments,” said Anne Russell, Supervisor of the Health Navigator program. “A person can have all the knowledge and good intentions they need, but without access to transportation, there is no way to access treatment. We have helped people access specialty care as far away as Pueblo and Denver,” said Russell, “to keep short-term problems from becoming long-term disabilities.”

“It is so gratifying to read all the success stories that have come from this program,” said Russell. “It’s amazing to me, the variety of ways that Health Navigators have been able to impact people’s lives.” The team of six Health Navigators



stationed in Prowers County have helped 549 people since the beginning of the program. They have assisted people to get to SSI hearings, to attend cancer treatments in Pueblo and burn treatments in Denver, to find housing, to track their blood glucose numbers, to get an appointment with a mental health counselor, and anything else they needed to achieve and maintain good

health. “I’m so proud of how hard they work, and how receptive the community has been,” said Russell.

Otero Junior College in La Junta partnered with Southeast Health Group to develop a Health Navigation program that has become a new career path for many. Twenty Prowers County health care workers took the pilot class in 2012 so they would become familiar with the role of the Health Navigator and be able to provide referrals to the SHG team. Since then, 74 people have taken at least one class in the Health Navigator certificate program. “This is an exciting new career,” said Russell, who helped write the curriculum and guided OJC in understanding the role of care coordination in healthcare. “Health Navigators will become increasingly important in preventing disease and promoting health.”

To find out more about Health Navigation services, call Southeast Health Group at 1-800-511-5446, or go to www.southeasthealthgroup.org.

For information about career opportunities through Otero Junior College’s Health Navigation certificate program, go to <http://www.ojc.edu/cteHealthNav.aspx>.