

TRAINING PROFESSIONALS THROUGH DEMENTIA DIALOGUES

PROBLEM

Individuals with Alzheimer's and other dementias have needs that often make care delivery challenging and more demanding. As the disease progresses, people have trouble both with recognizing when they are ill, in pain, or not safe and with communicating their needs. Yet, many professionals in home, community, and institutional settings have not received adequate training on how to effectively adjust care for the unique physical, behavioral, and communication challenges of people living with dementia. Therefore, many health care professionals and caregivers (especially in rural areas with limited health care access and fewer services) may not know how to recognize and use behavioral cues and other strategies to reduce injuries, avoid medication problems, and keep chronic conditions in check in order to avoid unnecessary hospitalizations.

SOLUTION

Training health care professionals and caregivers to effectively communicate with people living with Alzheimer's is strategic action E-06 in the *Healthy Brain Initiative Public Health Road Map* and helps states develop a more dementia-capable workforce.

To prepare the state for the growing number of older Utahns with Alzheimer's, the Utah Department of Health (UDOH) initiated evidence-informed trainings, *Dementia Dialogues*, to educate professionals working in the community,

caregivers, and family members about dementia. Developed and tested by the Arnold School of Public Health at the University of South Carolina, *Dementia Dialogues* enables participants to learn strategies for effective communication, and ways to promote independence in activities of daily living and mitigate challenging behaviors. The five-session training develops participants' skills in recognizing and using non-verbal cues, giving the person living with dementia a routine, responding if the person becomes aggressive, and helping clients and caregivers devise care plans. It is designed for low-cost replication using a "train-the-trainer" approach. One of the state goals in *Utah's State Plan for Alzheimer's and Related Dementias* — "a dementia-competent workforce" — is to develop and train a more dementia-proficient workforce.

Convinced of its value, UDOH sponsored the *Dementia Dialogues* master training session in 2016 to develop an initial cadre of certified leaders, each of whom committed to conducting free training in their communities. Those completing the training earn a dementia specialist certificate and 7.5 continuing education hours. The department partnered with Solstice Home Health & Hospice, Sunrise Senior Living, University of Utah, Gamma Rho Chapter of Sigma Theta Tau International, funeral homes, and mortuaries in communities to help sponsor the training workshops. Area agencies on aging and a local news radio station assisted with pro bono marketing.

INITIAL OUTCOMES

During the first two years, UDOH achieved the following:

- 52 professionals were trained to teach *Dementia Dialogues*, including five trainers for Spanish speakers and one trainer for people with hearing impairments.
- 36 *Dementia Dialogues* courses were held in rural, urban, and suburban settings with a combined attendance of 762 professionals in health care and long-term services and supports as well as caregivers.
- A total of 385 community caregivers attended four conferences on caring for people living with dementia.
- A future train-the-trainer course is already fully enrolled, and there is a waiting list.

As a result of these efforts, professionals in health care, long-term services and support, and other sectors have gained significant knowledge in how to uniquely respond to and care for people living with dementia.

By applying the knowledge and best practices embedded in *Dementia Dialogues*, both professionals and caregivers can better adapt chronic disease management, reduce agitation and difficult behaviors associated with communication problems, and provide care to help optimize functioning. These techniques may enable people with dementia to stay in their homes and communities longer and experience a better quality of life. This training also may help prevent avoidable hospitalizations because care professionals and caregivers are able to respond early to signs of illness and pain before a condition progresses to the point of requiring acute care.

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