Spotlight on the Safety Net

A Community Collaboration
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Just For Us

Do you remember when doctors made house calls? That is what the Just For Us program provides some aging residents of public and senior living housing complexes in Durham, North Carolina. The program began as a community collaboration between the Community Health Division of the Department of Community and Family Medicine and the School of Nursing at Duke University Health System, Lincoln Community Health Center, Durham County Department of Social Services, Durham County Health Department, The Durham Center (the Durham county mental health agency), Durham Council on Senior Citizens, and the Durham Housing Authority. After time was spent researching and communicating with the residents, the Just For Us program was launched in 2001 to help Durham's older adults maintain their health and improve their quality of life and support them as they age in place.

The Just For Us program provides medical care for participants in their own homes. One physician assistant, one nurse practitioner, and a supervising physician provide comprehensive primary medical care. The remainder of the interdisciplinary team consists of a social worker/case manager, community health worker, registered dietician, and occupational therapist. Patients may also receive behavioral health and other specialty services in their homes by partners of the program.

The program has provided consistent, appropriate care in a nurturing and supportive environment that has shifted costs to pharmaceuticals, home health care, and other preventive services rather than crisis management. The program is centered on identifying and meeting patient needs in context. Most patients in the Just For Us program have more than five chronic medical conditions. Prior to participation in the program, these patients often missed clinic appointments with their primary care provider, routinely visited emergency rooms, or were hospitalized and then sent home without connection to services. Those occurrences have dropped as a result of the program. Just for Us patients are engaged in their care, have high satisfaction rates, and are less socially isolated.

Gladys Crank, a 66-year-old stroke survivor who also has asthma, has been in the program for four years. After her stroke, she received care in a skilled nursing facility. When she was able to transition to her home, she was informed about the Just For Us program. She is grateful to have one main provider who knows about her life and cares about her. When she calls Just for Us her provider is “always right there.” According to Ms. Crank, “the program is more convenient and works well for all the patients, especially those who can’t drive and don’t have transportation.”

The Just For Us program is an asset to both the patients and providers. Dr. Robin Ali, the supervising physician and pharmacist for the program, notes that the best part of her job is establishing a trusting relationship with the patients. She has an intimate knowledge of patients in their home environment and regularly meets family members and caregivers. When providers are in the patients’ homes, the patients are very honest and open and the patient and provider develop long-term relationships. Based on that trusting relationship, Dr. Ali can help families with specialty referrals. They problem solve together and then watch the patient improve from the lifestyle changes. Just For Us providers can be the eyes and ears for the clinic primary care provider in the patient’s home and also serve as a resource for other specialists. For example, Dr. Ali was involved in a situation with a patient who had low potassium levels that baffled the clinic provider despite multiple tests and examinations. The Just For Us provider was able to determine that the patient had been taking a medication for its laxative properties but the medication
also had potassium-lowering effects. The problem was resolved due mainly to the trusting relationship and in-home context of the visit.

The Just For Us program has been featured in national publications for its unique care delivery model and outcome success. It serves as a national model and is being replicated with community modifications in various locations. The program alleviates access to care barriers by providing patient-centered care in the patients’ homes. The partners have worked to focus on maintaining health, using public reimbursement, and sharing electronic health records to coordinate and facilitate the team-based approach.

Through community collaboration and patient empowerment, the Just For Us program is providing the right care at the right time in the right place.

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