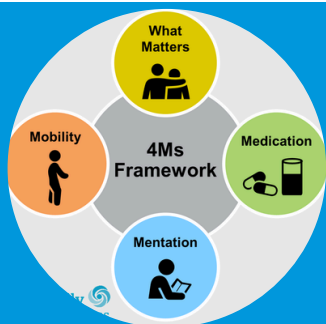


Age-Friendly Care in Action: How Breakwater Primary Care Is Supporting Rhode Island's Older Adults and Their Caregivers

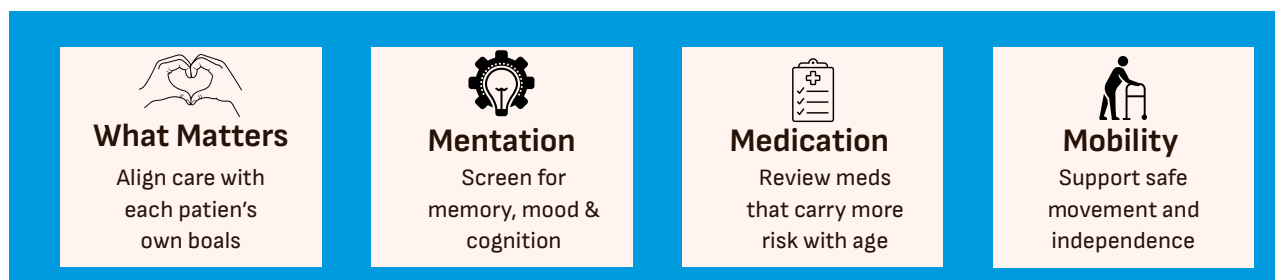


“What Matters Most to You?”

By Suzanne Herzberg, PhD, MS, OTR/L, Practice Facilitator

A simple question became the starting point for implementing age-friendly care at Breakwater Primary Care: “What matters most to you?” As the care teams incorporated this question into routine visits, they found it helped align care with patients' goals and priorities and fostered richer clinical conversations.

Asking “what matters most to you?” is one component of the Age-friendly Health Systems 4M Framework, developed by the John A. Hartford Foundation and the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI), together with the American Hospital Association and the Catholic Health Association of the United States. Because health priorities and needs change with age, the 4Ms focus on four essential elements of care: What Matters, Mentation (the mind), Medication, and Mobility.



Along with four other primary care practices, Breakwater Primary Care in Lincoln joined the first cohort of a quality improvement initiative in Rhode Island that had two main goals: implementing the 4M model in primary care and supporting caregivers of people with dementia.

Breakwater's experience reflects a broader effort to prepare Rhode Island primary care practices for an aging population. Over the past decade, Rhode Island's population has aged significantly. Individuals 65 and older now comprise 21% of Rhode Island's residents, and this number will increase to 25% by 2030. Primary care practices face the challenge and rewards of caring for an aging patient population, and this structured framework provides guidance for addressing the medical complexity of older adults.



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Recognizing this opportunity, several Rhode Island organizations came together to bring the age-friendly model to primary care practices and support caregivers of people with dementia. The Rhode Island Department of Health, the Care Transformation Collaborative of Rhode Island (CTC-RI), the Rhode Island Geriatric Education Center at URI, and UnitedHealthcare worked together to provide a combination of funding, program development and education, practice facilitation, and administrative support. Together, the organizations designed the program and pooled their expertise and funding to launch the initiative, and Breakwater Primary Care, under the direction of Dr. Hugo Yamada, joined the very first cohort in 2023.

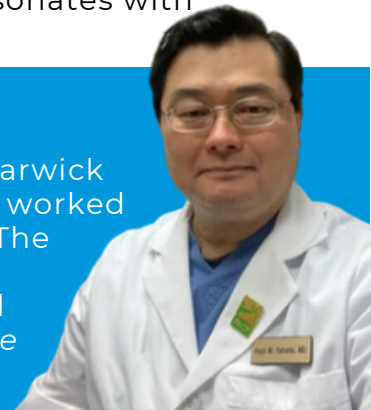
Participants in the quality improvement initiative attended three learning sessions, worked with practice facilitators over the course of six months, tested new workflows through plan-do-study-act cycles, and received coaching as they integrated the changes into their primary care visits and applied for the [IHI Age-Friendly recognition](#).

The 4M framework begins by asking what matters most to patients so that health care decisions reflect patient goals in addition to their medical conditions. The framework also encourages practices to review medications that may pose greater risks as people age, routinely screen for cognitive concerns such as dementia and depression, and promote safe mobility.

Although the needs of caregivers are not expressly addressed in the 4Ms, this project pairs age-friendly care with identifying and supporting caregivers of people with dementia. In Rhode Island, the Alzheimer's Association estimates that 36,000 caregivers provide over 50 million hours of unpaid care to people with Alzheimer's. Caregivers with limited financial resources often take on debt, deplete their assets, or deprioritize their own health conditions while providing care for others. Incorporating the identification and support of caregivers of people with dementia into this quality improvement project helps identify caregivers and provide them with access to resources and education.

To date, three cohorts have enrolled in the project, with the fourth cohort beginning this September. The continued interest in the project indicates that providing a structured pathway to implementing age-friendly care and supporting caregivers resonates with primary care practices.

Breakwater Primary Care in Lincoln has a long history of pursuing quality improvement. Under the leadership of Dr. Hugo Yamada, Breakwater first implemented the program in Lincoln before expanding the effort to its Warwick and Pawtucket practices. Breakwater's physicians and practice managers worked together to adapt workflows, train staff, and build sustainable processes. The sites noted that the work fit naturally into their approaches to care, commenting that it was both rewarding and less disruptive than they had imagined. As Warwick practice manager Jamie Handy observed, *"Everyone is probably already doing some of this work."*



All three Breakwater practices commented on the benefits of identifying care partners of patients with dementia, asking what matters to them, identifying their needs and providing them with resources based on this discussion. Nancy Latendresse, Pawtucket's practice manager, noted that *"We hadn't been tracking caregiver information before, and we didn't have resources for them when they were telling us about their stress."*

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Dr. Gregory Steinmetz found that screening for caregiver stress revealed a previously overlooked need. He said, “by screening, we have identified people that we didn’t know were dealing with care partner stress — almost like discovering a new disease.” Before engaging in this work, caregivers had been in the room for many visits but did not appear in the medical record. This initiative changed that approach; the teams began to identify caregivers, recognize them in the electronic health record, and connect them to resources.

All participating practices made measurable changes to their workflows to incorporate the 4Ms and received recognition from IHI for planning or implementing age-friendly care. On surveys completed at the program’s conclusion, participants shared how valuable they found the experience, particularly in asking patients about what matters.

As one participant wrote, “Asking what matters opens up conversations about what matters most to the patient, and it leads to coming up with something that is motivating to the patient.”

Like the care teams at Breakwater Primary Care, many participants appreciated the opportunity to identify and support caregivers. “Being able to identify active caregivers has been the most meaningful change around caregiving so that we can target them with appropriate education and resources.”

This project has led to some of the following caregiver results:

- In Cohort 1 alone, practices identified and documented 170 caregivers of people with dementia.
- Before starting the program, 16% of practices never identified caregivers of people with dementia. After the program, that percentage dropped to zero, with 60% of practices identifying 1 to 10 caregivers and 40% identifying 11 to 25 caregivers.
- 17 practices completed: all achieving Level 1 designation; seven achieved Level 2
- Adoption of 4M guidelines **increased by 35% overall!**



For Breakwater Primary Care and the other participating practices, implementing age-friendly care began not with a new clinical protocol but with a conversation. Asking “What matters most to you?” shifted the focus from treating medical problems to understanding each person’s goals. In doing so, it strengthened relationships among providers, patients, and caregivers while helping care teams deliver care that reflected what mattered most to the people they served.