

Responding to Substance Use and Abuse by Older Adults

By Stephanie Fischer, Managed Care Officer

On June 11, several staff members from the Home Care and Health Services, Senior Care Options, and Protective Services Departments, attended the Aging with Dignity Conference at College of the Holy Cross in Worcester. Organized by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health's Bureau of Substance Addiction Services, the day was devoted to exploring the intersection of aging and substance abuse. Elder Services of Cape Cod and the Islands is committed to the ongoing professional development of its staff, and the focus of this conference aligned well with their experiences in the field.

The American Psychiatric Association defines [Substance Use Disorder \(SUD\)](#) as a complex condition in which there is uncontrolled use of a substance despite harmful consequences. SUD exists on a spectrum and may be mild, moderate or severe. It typically involves an overpowering desire to use the substance, increased tolerance to the substance and/or withdrawal symptoms when you stop taking the substance. At the "Aging with Dignity" conference, experts from across the country offered workshops on a range of topics including the intersection of grief or depression and substance abuse, the effects of past substance abuse on health in later life, and how to stabilize housing for substance abusing older adults.

"I have been in the geriatric field for ten years, and substance abuse in the older population was not something we really talked about or even spent much time learning about when I was in school, getting my psychology degree," says Shelby DeCosta, Senior Care Options Program Manager. "It wasn't until I began working here at Elder Services that I really experienced first-hand how substance abuse among the older adults is real and is happening every day. People don't like to talk about it. It's uncomfortable and the stigma it carries is heavy."

According to the Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, "co-occurring mental health diagnoses with Substance Use Disorder in older adults tend to trend predominantly towards anxiety, depression, or cognitive impairment, but may also include other serious mental illness. Opioids, alcohol, benzodiazepines, methamphetamines have all been linked to increased incidence of cognitive impairment and dementia."

One of the workshops held at the conference, "[Substance Use Disorder and Older Adults](#)," led by Rossana Lau-Mg, M.D. from Boston Medical Center, highlighted how substance abuse can exacerbate chronic medical conditions and mental health disorders. To provide a better understanding of how severe SUD has become amongst elders, a recent study reported by CNBC, details that "Drug overdose deaths in seniors have more than tripled over the last two decades." The question that follows these alarming statistics is, why? As Rossana Dr. Lau-Mg believes this is because elders are less likely to self-report substance abuse or dependency, and face barriers with insurance for treatment options when they do.

Because substance abuse among elders is not regularly discussed, it often goes undiagnosed or underreported. Health care providers may avoid asking an older patient hard questions about substance use or may assume someone's incoherence or confusion is due age-related cognitive decline. On the other hand, patients might not ask for help because it can feel risky or they might assume treatments are unavailable or too expensive. All these things may be true, but there are new and innovative community-based approaches to recovery emerging in our service area, many of which are appropriate for and available to older adults.

Our Senior Care Options program manages community and home-based services for older adults eligible for both Medicare and MassHealth. The health insurance programs serving those enrolled in our Senior Care Options program offer behavioral health services to their members, including those dealing with substance use disorder. "It's an excellent benefit and we try our best to help our members utilize that service if needed," according to DeCosta. "Substance Use Disorder is all too real, and it's seen in all of the programs that Elder Services has." Trainings and conferences like this one help Elder Services' staff stay on top of current statistics and trends, so that we can better serve and help our consumers and community.