

# Good Mental Health Is Key To Healthy Aging

■ by Margaret Morrill

On June 1, members of the State Committee on Aging (SCOA) and the Joint Legislative Committee on Elder Affairs met to discuss mental health services for older adults. Representatives of the Area Committees on Aging, ServiceLink, senior centers and other organizations also attended the meeting, which was held at the Legislative Office Building in Concord.

Dr. Stephen Bartels, Medical Director for the Bureau of Elderly and Adult Services and Director of Dartmouth's Centers for Health and Aging, and Dr. Louis Josephson, CEO of Riverbend Community Mental Health, Inc (Concord, NH), one of New Hampshire's ten community mental health centers, gave a powerpoint presentation on seniors and mental health needs, including current research and best practices. Some key points were:

- ◆ The population age 65 and older is increasing (the NH Office of Energy and Planning indicates that between 2010 and 2030, the 65+ population will increase nearly 130% (2.3 times what it is now).
- ◆ Untreated depression or other mental illness can contribute to or aggravate other existing health problems, lead a person to withdraw from family, friends, and activities, and seriously impede an individual's ability to go on living independently. This not only represents a high personal cost, but leads to higher health care costs as well.
- ◆ Elders are underserved with respect to mental health services and many cases of depression go undiagnosed. Contributing factors here are the stigma associated with mental illness and the false belief that depression is a "normal" part of aging. (As a matter of fact, older adults who are treated for depression can benefit as much, if not more, than their younger counterparts.)
- ◆ Professionals are becoming more aware of the mind-body connection in successful treatment. For example, people who have a heart attack or stroke, and also have depression, have worse health outcomes, including a higher mortality rate.

"The evidence from research is clear," says Dr. Bartels. "We cannot separate mental health from physical health, especially in older adults, who are likely to have chronic medical problems that affect mental well being. In turn, mental well being affects physical health and quality of life."

According to Owen Houghton, SCOA Chair, all this makes a strong case for investment in a health care system that integrates mental health services with other wellness services, including preventive care. "This should be an important consideration as New Hampshire plans for the future health care needs of its citizens, including seniors," said Dr. Houghton.

Dr Houghton also indicated that SCOA intends to continue its collaboration on this issue with the Joint Legislative Committee on Elder Affairs.

Regarding existing mental health services, New Hampshire's community mental health centers provide services to people of all ages, including specialized services for older adults. During the June 1 presentation, Riverbend CEO Dr. Louis Josephson discussed some of the programs sponsored by Riverbend that benefit older adults, including InSHAPE (opportunities to improve nutrition and fitness) and the HEALTH BUDDY study, which is being done to determine whether a telehealth device in the home of consumers with mental illness and another chronic health issue will reduce their use of emergency and urgent psychiatric and health services, and increase their ability to self-manage their symptoms.

Consumers who choose to participate in the HEALTH BUDDY study answer a series of diagnostic-specific questions every day. A telehealth nurse reviews the responses and can intervene or educate the consumer. Early stories from the study show that consumers feel supported by the telehealth arrangement and have avoided expensive hospital stays for medical and mental health issues.



From the left: Dr. Owen Houghton, SCOA Chair; Dr. Louis Josephson, CEO of Riverbend Community Mental Health Services, Inc.; Rep. Joan Schulze, Chair of the Joint Legislative Committee on Elder Affairs; and Dr. Stephen Bartels, Director of the Centers for Health and Aging at Dartmouth.

Another unique program in New Hampshire is REAP (The Referral Education and Assistance Program). Through a partnership with New Hampshire's ten community mental health centers, REAP is available in communities statewide and offers free and confidential counseling and educational services to help older adults understand and deal with life changes and stresses and to address problems related to medication misuse or alcohol. Brief counseling is offered to adults in their own homes. REAP services are also available to family members who are concerned about their loved ones. Another component of REAP is education, specifically educational sessions on how to deal with life changes, grief and loss, stress, interpersonal relationships, medication management and mental health issues.

REAP is funded by the NH Housing Finance Authority, the DHHS Bureau of Drug and Alcohol Services (via the Governor's Commission on Alcohol and Drug Prevention, Intervention and Treatment), the DHHS Bureau of Elderly and Adult Services, and the DHHS Bureau of Behavioral Health.

Last year, REAP served 2,178 older adults statewide. However, the demand for REAP services continues to increase, says Lucille Karatzas, Director of Elder Services at the Seacoast Mental Health Center and director of the REAP Program. This increasing demand is likely to hold true for all mental health services as New Hampshire's aging population continues to grow.

**Getting Help.** Are feelings of sadness, loneliness or anxiety getting you down? Are life changes or losses overwhelming you or someone you love? For confidential counseling, call your community mental health center (listed on page 7 of Aging Issues), or if you aren't sure which mental health center covers your area, call NH ServiceLink at 1-866-634-9412.

## QUALITY OF LIFE AWARDS

is composed of representatives from nursing homes, the State Committee on Aging, the Office of the State Long-Term Care Ombudsman, the DHHS, and other community stakeholders.

According to the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid (CMS), New Hampshire nursing homes are not only above the national average, but they also lead the nation in deficiency-free surveys conducted by CMS in 2004 and 2006. "While this is an extraordinary achievement, New Hampshire's Quality of Life award process

enables the nursing homes to be recognized not only for the quality of care, but also for the quality of life experienced by the residents," said Don Rabun.

Each nursing home applying to be considered for a Quality of Life Award must first submit a self-assessment and a description of the facility's recent changes and achievements. A team from the QOL Council reviews the information from each applicant (the name of the facility is removed from the material to ensure objectivity during the review process) and selects the homes that warrant further consideration. A "travel team" composed of four different individuals selected by the Council then visits the finalists, tours the nursing homes, and talks with residents, staff and family members before the winners are selected.

A booklet containing the various quality of life endeavors initiated by the nursing homes that applied this year will be made available to those who attend the 2009 Quality of Life event on September 29. "We hope that these good practices can be implemented in nursing homes across the State," said Don Rabun. Anyone interested in receiving a copy of this booklet can do so by contacting the Office of the Long-Term Care Ombudsman (OLTCO) at 271-4375 or e-mailing [oltco@dhhs.state.nh.us](mailto:oltco@dhhs.state.nh.us).

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## AGING ISSUES

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## Dear ServiceLink

**Q:** My Dad is in frail health and lives in my home; we want him to be able to stay with us as long as possible. Can you tell me what services and options are available to help us?  
— Carolyn.

**A:** The types of services you and your dad may need in order for him to stay in your own home will depend on how much help he needs in managing everyday tasks. Determining these needs can be challenging. You can start by determining the "level of care" or needs your dad may have. Does dad need nursing services, help with personal care or ongoing supervision? If you answered "yes" to any of these, you may want to check out some of the resources listed below:

- ◆ Homemaker and home health services available from the local visiting nurses association or other agency;
- ◆ Home-delivered meals, available from senior centers or other community organizations;
- ◆ Adult day program services, which include caring for a person's needs for food, activity, rest, supervision and other personal care activities, for part of the 24-hour day, in a licensed adult day program;
- ◆ Transportation, which may be available from the local senior center or another community organization;
- ◆ Senior center services, which include, but are not limited to, home-delivered meals, transportation, exercise programs, educational programs, opportunities to socialize and make new friends.

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## NEW HAMPSHIRE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of the NH Department of Health and Human Services is to join communities and families in providing opportunities for citizens to achieve health and independence.