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MVES Awarded Grant to Ease Behavioral Health Crisis

The aging population in Massachusetts is increasing, while at the same time, the number of older adults with behavioral health problems is also rising. Massachusetts is not alone – U.S. officials have described older Americans as facing a behavioral health crisis.

As part of its ongoing efforts to support emotional well-being during the aging journey, Mystic Valley Elder Services (MVES) was awarded a \$150,000 grant from the state’s Behavioral Health Outreach for Aging Populations (BHOAP) program.

“Behavioral health conditions skyrocketed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Those issues didn’t simply vanish when quarantine was lifted, especially for our community’s aging population, who are more likely to remain socially isolated,” observed Lisa Gurgone, Chief Executive Officer for MVES. “We’re proud to receive the BHOAP grant, which will help our team support those who are in critical need of care.”

Central to the behavioral health crisis is the need for treatment. While an estimated 1 in 4 older Americans has a behavioral health condition not associated with normal aging, less than 33 percent of this population receives services to address their diagnosis. Within Massachusetts, BHOAP aims to address this problem.

More than half of those enrolled in Mystic Valley Elder Services’ home care programs reported having a behavioral health diagnosis, and MVES has identified an increase in diagnoses over the past decade. The BHOAP grant enables MVES to build on its existing outreach efforts and work to overcome barriers to care, including:

- Coping with other chronic illnesses and physical frailty
- Transportation limitations
- Cost of care
- Social isolation
- Technological barriers
- Cultural differences in approaches to behavioral care
- Societal and/or generational stigma

“Stigma is a major obstacle to any individual receiving treatment, but it can be a barrier that’s especially difficult for the aging population,” explained Lisa Felci Jimenez, MVES Director of Clinical Services. “People dismiss these issues by saying, you’re just lonely or you just worry too much. Part of our team’s mission is to overcome these misconceptions and ensure people receive the care they need. Depression and anxiety are not an inevitable part of the aging process.”

MVES has provided access to behavioral health services through its Complex Care team since 2005. The BHOAP grant empowers MVES to expand its Complex Care team and better serve the aging population throughout its 11-community service area.

The Complex Care team focuses on increasing access to home- and community-based counseling to address a wide range of issues including hoarding, depression, anxiety, adjustment to loss, substance abuse and more. They develop a personalized plan for each individual, connecting them to the care they need and monitoring each case over time. By working closely with other departments at MVES, the team ensures the individual receives any other support they need, such as transportation assistance or social engagement.

The Complex Care team also offers bilingual support and works to build awareness and partnership throughout the community.

“Our team ensures health providers and community organizations are aware that MVES offers a range of services to support aging and that behavioral health is a key part of our offerings,” explained Jennifer Shacklewood, MVES Complex Care Team Manager. “We want to improve that 33 percent of older adults who are receiving the treatment they need. The best way to do that is together, as a community.”