

Caregivers' interventions can prevent falls

Older adults strongly prefer to age in place, and aging in community can be a less expensive long-term residential option for them and for their families. But aging in place can come with potential hazards such as falls risk—one of the greatest barriers to older adults' independence.

Seniorlink staff are in daily contact with caregivers through an online platform.

Seniorlink, a company that helps caregivers and their clients by actively managing care through a combination of trained staff and technology, announced remarkable results from its Falls Risk Management Program (FMP) during the 2017 Aging in America Conference this past March. This program was implemented within the company's intensive in-home care model called Caregiver Homes.

Seniorlink's Clients and Services

Caregiver Homes operates through payers that include state government-sponsored healthcare plans and managed care plans. Recipients of the service are referred to by the plan, a local church, community group, advocacy organization, other partners or recommended by a friend. The company's staff comes into the home and assesses the care recipient, caregiver and the environment—all must qualify for the program, meaning the care recipient has to have a designated level of need in performing activities of daily living; the caregiver has to be at least age 18 and deemed capable of properly caring for the care recipient; and the home environ-

ment has to be safe (i.e., with appropriate lighting and stairwell railings, etc.).

Seniorlink staff visit the client's home once or twice a month depending upon need, but are in daily contact with caregivers through Vela, a secure care collaboration platform that aids communication between care teams and caregivers, offered through mobile devices and desktop computers. Caregivers answer questions regarding changes in medications, doctor visits or new hospital stays. Then nurses or care managers from Seniorlink follow up via secure messaging, phone calls or visits.

Vela is a HIPAA-secure environment, so caregivers can send photos of medication lists or hospital discharge instructions to Seniorlink staff; eventually, Seniorlink hopes to connect both its staff and caregiver clientele directly with other involved healthcare providers and payers.

Managing Falls Risk

As part of its FMP, Seniorlink evaluates care recipients for fall risk, and trains caregivers to prevent falls. Jay V. Patel, Seniorlink's Clinical Transformation Officer, is entrusted with ensuring the company maintains high clinical quality and a focus on person-centered care, he told **Aging Today** in a recent conversation about the FMP.

Patel says Seniorlink knew falls were a huge problem, and when they analyzed their population and realized 13 percent end up in the emergency room after a fall, they knew how much better that number could be with a prevention program.

The FMP showed a 50 percent reduction in the falls rate for care recipients over the past two years. Generally, 25 per-

cent of people older than age 65 experience one fall per year, and every 11 seconds, someone older than age 65 ends up in the emergency room being treated for injuries sustained in a fall. As part of the FMP, Seniorlink Care managers ask four questions (a Falls Quick Screen) of caregivers; this enables them to place care recipients in four categories of fall risk. Concentrating on the "high risk of fall" and "high risk of injury" categories, care managers assess what makes this person unique and create a personalized care plan to help the caregiver prevent falls.

Caregivers, Pharmacists

Play Important Roles

"Caregivers need to be our eyes and ears, for all the days when we're not in the home," says Patel. "So we encourage the caregivers to look out for things—are there enough nightlights, does the client need a walker or a shower chair, do we need to [make] equipment changes? ... Do we need to get physical therapists involved? We also monitor drug therapy, by asking the care recipient and caregiver if there are any new medications."

Pharmacists are a particularly important community link for caregivers.

Many caregivers have no medical training, so the care teams focus on caregiver needs and coach and support them with whatever information they may need to feel more confident. After training, caregivers can identify when something's not right with the care recipient or in the home, and advocate for a certain therapy



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or an equipment change; Seniorlink can then connect them to a local resource.

Pharmacists are a particularly important community link in the FMP, as they're easier to get in to see than a physician, and well-versed in medication management and drug interactions. In the FMP program, each time care managers and nurses speak with families, they revisit care recipients' medications regimens. They'll even help script what a caregiver should say to a physician if there is reason to discontinue medications.

Collaboration Is Key to Preventing Falls

When the Seniorlink falls reduction analysis began in 2013, the company invested time and energy to coach care teams about what to look for on a fall, how to coach caregivers and how to document outcomes. At first, the falls rate increased as care managers began to document each instance of a fall, but as more caregivers were coached, the rate has been steadily declining (Seniorlink continues to track the rate). The original analysis evaluated 2,460 care recipients.

"Seniorlink is committed to improving falls and outcomes," says Patel. "Just one example is by using technology solutions like Vela, which encourages collaboration with multiple people. We know we can improve outcomes by improving caregivers' collaboration with the extended care team involved in delivering high quality care." ■