

'A LITTLE BIT OF SUPPORT:' Charlestown hospital offers unique program for seniors

By GARY POPP

gary.popp@newsandtribune.com | Posted: Sunday, May 18, 2014 7:10 am

A new program in Charlestown is providing help to those who are finding their golden years not as bright.

Officials with Saint Catherine Regional Hospital say they are finding success with Active Senior Kare [ASK] program, which was launched late last year. The multifaceted program provides services to area seniors struggling with depression or feeling overwhelmed from the stresses of growing old.

While the program began in October, officials held an open house ceremony last week to formally introduce ASK to the public. The program started with only two clients, but has provided services to nearly 35 people in its first six months.

ASK therapist Aaron Hellems says those in the program must show certain mental health needs to enter the intensive outpatient group therapy.

“[The program] is a helping hand, but it does require an assessment by a psychiatrist and there does have to be a psychiatric diagnosis,” Hellems said. “It could be something like an adjustment disorder where they are having difficulty adjusting to the changes in their lives.”

ASK provides the opportunity for increased social interaction to its clients, many of whom live alone, in a nursing home or at an assisted living facility.

“It is not that there is anything wrong with them. It is just that life is hard, and they need a little bit of support,” Hellems said of the clientele.

The issues that the clients struggle with include grief from the loss of a loved one, loneliness, constant worrying, dealing with the loss of independence and feelings of uselessness, isolation, fear and hopelessness.

“We bring them together and talk about these things to kind of normalize them because these are just a natural part of aging,” Hellems said. “The ability for them to get together and realize they are not alone and that other people are feeling the same way they feel can do miraculous things for their mental health

05_09_ASK_01w.jpg

Joan Corbett, Charlestown, and Carolyn Woods, Otisco, visit with one another in one of the ASK, Active Senior Kare, group therapy rooms at Saint Catherine Regional Hospital on Wednesday. Saint Catherine held a ribbon cutting for the official opening of the ASK, a medicare funded program aimed to help seniors cope through socialization and group support.

and the way they approach life.”

Hellems said one of the most powerful elements of ASK is the clients’ ability to help one another.

He said the group forum allows the clients to “bounce ideas off each other,” adding that if one client has suffered and overcome anxiety in the past, he or she can help another client who is suffering from feelings of anxiety.

Hellems said the therapy is not “the classic laying back on a couch, Freudian thoughts, its folks sitting around supporting each other and learning new skills.”

The program goes beyond the benefits of group therapy, however.

Individual therapy is also offered, Hellems said, as well as screenings for vital signs and oversight to make sure the clients are properly taking their prescribed medications. To make the program more accessible, officials provide a transportation service to get clients to and from the hospital for ASK sessions.

Hellems said clients can come to ASK up to three times a week, and of the 26 current clients, most come at least twice a week. The typical visit to ASK last four hours, he said.

Clients are also provided a free meal by the hospital that gives them even more social interaction.

“They kind of become friends after a while, and that is really cool to see,” Hellems said. “It is fun to watch them enjoy each other.”

He said it is also satisfying to see the progress clients make while in the program.

“It is fun for us to watch the change. From coming in feeling like the world has taken them over to see them graduating toward independence again,” he said. “And, they are usually the last ones to see it. Our staffers see them feeling better, then the group members see them feeling better and at one point they are like, ‘You know what, I’m starting to feel better.’”

Hellems said ASK does not include “service coordination,” but there are times when program officials will reach out to a client’s family member to help address needs at home, such as more frequent visitation from friends and family.

“We are really trying to empower the family to try to get them involved and the client to get involved,” Hellems said.

He said the program has no age minimum, but the clients are typically 50 years old and older.

Hellems said ASK provides needed services primarily in Charlestown, but the clientele includes people from Jeffersonville and New Albany.

“Our population is aging. More and more people are going to be over the age of 65 in the near future, and

I think sometimes the elderly population can get forgotten,” he said. “We are attending to that older, vulnerable population and addressing the mental health needs within that group.”

Saint Catherine Regional Hospital President Merlyn Knapp said he partnered with PremierCare to bring the program to Charlestown. Knapp said PremierCare has a record of helping people across the country who have psychiatric issues resulting from the stresses of old age.

“I can’t take 100 percent credit for it, but I’m delighted we have this program. It is really the future,” Knapp said. “A program like this starts out small. It has just mushroomed since the first of the year. We think it is going to grow from here.”