Ohio Medicaid launches a dedicated engagement project to reduce loneliness among long-term care residents

Managed care organizations, Area Agencies on Aging and ODM partner on "friendly caller" program to provide social support for Ohioans most vulnerable to COVID-19

November 24, 2020

COLUMBUS, Ohio – The Ohio Department of Medicaid (ODM) is joining forces with the five Medicaid managed care organizations (MCO) and Area Agencies on Aging (AAA) to support Ohioans most vulnerable to COVID19. From now through the holidays, individuals living in nursing and assisted living facilities can receive additional social and emotional supports through a joint "friendly caller" initiative.

COVID has been devastating to residents of long-term living facilities. In Ohio, nearly 19,000 facility residents have been stricken with the virus. And tragically, 54% of reported coronavirus deaths in the state are among residents in long-term living facilities. Social distancing efforts put in place to protect these individuals has an unintended consequence of increased loneliness and despair.

ODM and managed care volunteer participants trained by AAAs on "friendly caller" techniques provide companionship and support through scheduled, informal conversations. Residents interested in the initiative are linked through the AAAs with trained callers to share their thoughts, feelings, and memories, or converse on any topics of interest during twice-weekly, 30-minute phone chats. Additionally, callers trained on the UCLA Loneliness Scale – the leading scientific measure in evaluating loneliness – include three questions from the assessment tool to identify residents who may need additional interventions.

"Research shows us that the holidays are an emotionally challenging time for those residing in shared living facilities – a reality exacerbated by months of social distancing and limited interaction with loved ones," said Maureen Corcoran, director of Ohio Medicaid. "We also know that depression can accelerate physical deterioration – this initiative gets to the heart of the matter by offering consistent, caring, and highly interpersonal connections that are needed now and throughout the holidays ahead."

Loneliness can be a disproportionately acute byproduct of the holiday season for individuals living in residential care facilities. When coupled with months of isolation, the mental and emotional toll is heavy. A recent Kaiser Family Foundation report found a notable increase in the rate of depression among facility residents due to the pandemic. One in four adults ages 65 and older (24%) reported anxiety or depression in August (a rate that has 2 been relatively constant since March). By comparison, the same study conducted in 2018 found that roughly 10% of this group reported anxiety or depression.

The focus on delivering social relief to this population reflects the population health approach ODM follows to improve the quality of care for Medicaid recipients. Modeled after the Institute for Healthcare Improvement's (IHI) "science of improvement," and W. Edwards Deming's total quality management philosophy, the method calls for collaborative design, disciplined implementation, and rigorous measurements.

ODM's socialization initiative is one of several quality care initiatives introduced by Ohio Medicaid to mitigate the impact of COVID-19. Any nursing or assisted living facility with a minimum of 50 residents receiving services through an Ohio Medicaid managed care programs can participate in the program.

Medicaid's approach enables the agency to more effectively identify and reduce health inequities, gain insights into the factors that influence health, and strengthen its focus on serving the individual. Additional COVID-19 prevention and intervention strategies will be introduced shortly that leverage recent telehealth expansions and expand transportation services within small and rural communities.

# # #