

With compassion and care, Champlain CCAC staff connect those in need to a brighter future

As the steadily rising population of Ottawa ages, the residents who fall into the expanding senior citizen demographic are being confronted with many difficult realities inherent with growing old. Many want to keep their independence by staying in their own homes, but need assistance with daily tasks in order to do so; others lack the mobility to make it to stores and appointments; others have medical needs that aren't being met due to a lack of a physician or physiotherapist.

The growing need for assistance in the community isn't exclusively a byproduct of an aging populace; residents of all ages with disabilities also require a helping hand to remedy their sense of isolation and frustration and guide them towards community-based services that will help restore their confidence and independence.

The staff at the Champlain Community Care Access Centre (CCAC), the second largest health provider in the region's Local Health Integration Network, have a mandate to help these people. Their tag line, "Connecting you with care", couldn't be more literal. Each day 25,000 people are helped by the over 600 Champlain CCAC staff located strategically in 18 area hospitals and 10 satellite offices. When a client needing services phones the CCAC or walks into one of their offices, a trained Information and Referral worker, a Team Assistant, or a Case Manager is assigned who will assess their needs, inform them of the community support services available to them, and work on their behalf to coordinate the right services to see that the client's needs are fulfilled.

Sometimes what the client needs is available to them just by visiting a satellite office. Some are looking to have a question answered, others might simply want a person to talk to. Compassionate and well-trained, the CCAC staff are prepared to respond to all needs, whatever they might be.

Christine Halpern, currently a Team Assistant for the Supportive Care Program, spent several years as a Team Assistant at the CCAC's satellite office in Hazeldean Mall in Kanata. There she discovered how rewarding it was to be able to lend assistance to and interact with the members of the community who walked through the door. Though up to 25 people a day came into the office, the repeat visitors to the mall who would drop in regularly had a lasting impact on Halpern.

"There was one gentleman in particular," recalls Halpern. "A person told us that he was stuck in his power chair. I went out to talk to him...He came to the mall every day and was a lonely man. I called the company that manufactured the chair, who had someone come out to fix it."

The client was a war veteran, and as his visits to the office continued a friendship blossomed

between the two. When Halpern's father came to visit from Winnipeg one day, he asked to meet the man he had heard so much about.

One elderly lady, who had lost two husbands and her son, would regularly come into the office for a brief chat; basic human interaction that can have a large impact on the quality of life for an elderly person. Another man with mobility issues made the staff needlepoint Christmas decorations, which can still be found on Halpern's tree during the holiday season.

“I felt I was a better person for having known them,” said Halpern. “These were people who needed some help. So I'm a big believer in satellite offices; having worked in one, I appreciate how you can give so much more by being there in person....There are so many community resources we can use, such as help for seniors living at home (like the Ottawa Community Support Coalition). At the very least we can direct them to where they can get the help they need.”

The CCAC divides its clients into those seeking care in their home or at school and those who can no longer be cared for in their own home and need to access a long-term care facility. The client's Case Manager (who checks in regularly) develops a plan to see that services are delivered. Home care services can include nurses, personal support workers, social workers, physiotherapists and occupational therapists, and delivery of medical supplies. Community care services range from transportation, meal service, day programs, and supportive housing to specialized services like mental health and addiction counseling, even school health support services for children whose state of health impacts their ability to learn.

To provide the best possible service for clients, the CCAC is actively searching for efficiencies so they can make the most of the funding they receive from the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care (MOHLTC), at the same time initiating programs that bring valuable health resources to those who need it most (with the added benefit of relieving some of the pressure on overtaxed hospital ER's).

“Staff have pulled together to find efficiencies,” said Patrice Connolly, Vice President of Human Resources, Organizational Development and Communications of the Champlain CCAC. “For example, we have a nursing clinic model for people who can make it to a clinic. It allows a nurse to serve more people in one spot.”

Significant savings have been found in the field of wound care; as well, improvements in telephone service means that offices within the expansive Champlain region can now dial direct to each other and avoid long-distance charges, resulting in large cost savings.

One of the CCAC's largest successes has been its Aging In Place program. Launched in October, 2007, as a partnership of community service providers (including the Ottawa Community Housing Corporation), the program connects at-risk seniors in targeted apartment buildings with the

health and social services they need to improve their quality of life and prevent hospital visits. So successful was the program that it was expanded to 11 buildings housing 2,400 residents. The proactive investment in home care even involved the purchase of a van and full-time driver to carry residents to appointments and social events and reduce isolation.

For those patients/clients who do find themselves requiring hospital care, the CCAC's 'FLO' Collaborative (launched by the MOHLTC) aims to ensure that no one fall through the cracks of the health care system. By teaming up with the Ottawa Hospital and Pembroke Regional Hospital for two 18-month quality improvement initiatives, the CCAC hopes to boost the efficiency of the flow of patients through the system, with a special focus on improving transitions from acute care hospitals to subsequent care destinations for all patients/clients.

To address the multitude of people in the Champlain region without their own physician, the CCAC acted on a mandate from the province to create the Care Connect program.

“Our mandate is to connect people without primary care physicians to a physician, and we've connected well over 1,000 people so far through our Care Connector program,” said Connolly. In conjunction with this program is one sponsored by Health Force Ontario at the Champlain LHIN where a recruiter seeks out physicians within the region who are able to take on new patients, including those returning from careers in the United States.

To support the staff of CCAC in providing outstanding care every day, the Champlain CCAC has recently received a grant from Health Force Ontario, which has resulted in a series of workshops and tools to assist staff in their day to day conversations and interactions. CUPE 503 has endorsed the grant application and many of its members have stepped forward as champions to support their colleagues in their learnings.

With the support services that are available in the community, there is no reason why elderly residents or those with disabilities should not be connected with the care they require and deserve. For some, however, finding and coordinating the services can be an intimidating task. The Champlain CCAC and its dedicated staff take the confusion and worry out of the equation by stepping in and connecting their clients with proper care. Just knowing that someone is looking out for you and can be called upon for help, answers or even just a friendly chat, goes a long way to restoring a sense of well-being and confidence.