

## Outreach Strategies – Caregivers as SHIP Ambassadors

Joyce White is the Director of the Medicare Assistance Project at Westport Cooperative Services ([WCS](#)) in Kansas City, Missouri. WCS is a senior social service agency that works as a sponsor site for Missouri's SHIP program, [CLAIM](#), through a Memorandum of Understanding. Joyce has been assisting seniors with Medicare questions for six years.

Like many social services agencies, WCS provides an array of ongoing services for seniors including Meals on Wheels, the Senior Companions Program, and the Medicare Assistance Project. Joyce talked with HAP about WCS efforts to reach out to seniors through their caregivers.

In the following Q&A, Joyce described how connecting with caregivers is a great way to serve seniors through a community of people they know and trust. If you have additional questions about reaching out to caregivers, please contact Joyce at [jewwhite131@hotmail.com](mailto:jewwhite131@hotmail.com).

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### Why reach out to caregivers?

Caregivers often have first-hand experience in helping their loved ones get the care and coverage they need. We've seen many situations where caregivers feel the stress of being sandwiched between caring for elderly parents and providing for their children. For some, their introduction to Medicare is in the midst of a crisis. This leaves them in urgent need of patient and competent assistance to navigate a complex program. We want them to know, before a crisis, that SHIPs provide exactly that kind of service.

Since our mission as a SHIP sponsor site is to assist, counsel, and educate Medicare beneficiaries, it was a natural progression to reach out to the people—spouses, adult children, neighbors, and friends—who very often are helping Medicare beneficiaries access the care they need in hospitals, skilled nursing facilities, and at home. Sometimes, that help can make the difference between a person living at home and premature admission to a long-term care facility.

### What is *Accessing the Care in Medicare: A Guide for Caregivers*?

There weren't many resources available for people who were unfamiliar with Medicare and written from a caregiver's perspective. So we saw a need to create a basic manual to introduce caregivers to Medicare's benefits and to some of the coverage problems that they may encounter. We created a manual called *Accessing the Care in Medicare: A Guide for Kansas City Caregivers* a couple of years ago through a small grant. Additional funding allows us to use the manual as curriculum in workshops.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: Mike Klug of HAP contributed background to this Q&A since he was Director of WCS's Medicare Assistance Program and authored this manual.

We use these workshops as opportunities to educate caregivers about Medicare's basics while alerting them to some of the "red flags" in Medicare coverage; things like premature hospital discharge and durable medical equipment denials. The manual contains several actual case studies to illustrate the care beneficiaries are entitled to while providing an easy-to-understand description of original Medicare. We also take the opportunity to highlight the SHIP program as a resource when problems arise. We helped some caregivers appeal coverage denials on their parent's behalf as an outgrowth of these workshops.

### **How has the program evolved over time?**

WCS conducts three to four community workshops each year for audiences of caregivers and seniors. Following these sessions, attendees can be connected to one of 20 trained volunteer SHIP counselors who help with individual questions and problems.

We have also worked toward holding Medicare 101 workshops at area congregations and other community groups, so we can reach out to caregivers and beneficiaries through already established networks. We see a huge opportunity to work with community leaders, such as parish nurses and social workers. These community leaders can serve as the eyes and ears of SHIP because people come to them with all kinds of challenges around health and health care. Using the *Accessing the Care in Medicare* manual, we equip community leaders with information about basic Medicare coverage issues and the knowledge that SHIP is here to help with questions and problems related to Medicare. These leaders help us reach beneficiaries and their caregivers when they need assistance.

Really, this manual is another step in partnership development. It has potential to inform people in the community about the Medicare program and the SHIP as a resource, creating a stronger referral network for SHIPs.

### **How might other SHIP programs utilize this manual?**

The *Accessing the Care in Medicare* guidebook can be easily adapted to fit your SHIP program. It could be used as a learning tool about Medicare coverage problems in trainings or on your website. This manual is best used as a jumping off point to guide a learning situation and help people understand that SHIPs are a resource when complicated issues come up.

Check out HAP's new [Medicare Advantage selection tools](#), which guide beneficiaries and their caregivers through a step-by-step process to explore whether or not an [HMO](#) or [PFFS](#) plan is right for their needs.

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