

Policy Discussions Advance at 'Convening' on Consumer Direction in Aging Services

Consumer-directed care, while a growing trend in many areas of health care, often elicits apprehension from home health providers. With consumer-directed care already entrenched in delivery of services to the developmentally disabled, senior advocates increasingly have been examining the role that the consumer direction model might play in delivery of long-term care services to older adults.

As part of that effort, the National Association of State Units on Aging (NASUA) and the National Council on the Aging (NCoA), with funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, have embarked on a three-year project to increase opportunities for consumer direction in home and community-based services for seniors. NASUA and NCoA called in the stakeholders to provide their input this week, hosting a "National Convening on Consumer Direction" that drew policy leaders from government (federal, state, and local), the provider/caregiver community, academia, and consumer advocacy organizations.

A defining characteristic of the consumer-directed model of service delivery is to allow the patient more choice and control over how, and from whom, they receive supportive services. Some consumer direction programs expand the client's control further by providing a cash benefit with which the participant can purchase services or pay caregivers, including family members.

Clients must be able (and willing) to take on the responsibilities inherent in this care model, Forster pointed out, which could include payroll and claims management, background screening and training of caregiver applicants, and other administrative tasks. In large part, attendees of the meeting agreed that consumer direction is not appropriate for all seniors, and that choice of care delivery models is important to maintain in long-term care services to older adults.

A number of the consumer direction models described at the meeting did incorporate important safeguards, such as requiring a comprehensive assessment to determine whether a client is able to self-direct care and undertake all the responsibilities involved, or setting requirements for training and screening hired caregivers. The bulk of self-directed care programs for seniors currently are financed through state and local funds, the Older Americans Act, and Medicaid waiver and personal care option programs.