

PROMISING PRACTICES IN HOME AND COMMUNITY-BASED SERVICES

Georgia – Increasing Service Flexibility for Caregivers

Issue: Vouchers Caregivers Use to Pay for Services

Summary

Legacy Express is a four-county program in north Georgia aimed at improving the quality of services provided to older Americans and their caregivers. *Legacy Express* provides vouchers to caregivers which may be spent on service options ranging from respite and medications to haircuts and lawn care. The objective is to give caregivers the authority and flexibility to select those service options that work best for them. Originally targeted at persons with Alzheimer's Disease, the program has gradually been expanded to serve older people.

Introduction

Older people and their family members can benefit from a wide variety of services. For example, a family may want adult day care one day and help with their lawn the next day. Yet many programs limit the scope of available services. As a result, caregivers are often unable to obtain the assistance they need for those in their charge. The State of Georgia and Legacy Link, an Area Agency on Aging in northern Georgia, offer vouchers to caregivers that they can spend on a wide range of services.

This report briefly describes the implementation, mechanics, and effectiveness of the *Legacy Express* self-directed care project, under which caregivers receive one/two book[s] of \$10, \$20, and \$50 vouchers (total value: \$1,000 per year) which can be used to purchase services from approved providers. This document is based primarily on interviews with the state and local staff who conceived and designed the initial program and have been involved in its four-year evolution, as well as on written descriptions of the project.

Background

For the last few years, the State of Georgia has been looking increasingly to design programs that meet state and federal requirements in a way that is most flexible and empowering to consumer needs. When the *Legacy Express* program was created in 1998, Georgia examined self-determination models developed in the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Self-

Determination Project, which started initiatives in 19 states to empower and provide flexibility for people with developmental disabilities. The U.S. Department of Human Services' Health Resources and Services Administration initially funded *Legacy Express* through the Alzheimer's Demonstration Project, which is now administered by the Administration on Aging (AoA) in the same federal department.

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The program has been expanded considerably since its inception, both in the population it serves and the services it offers. In 2001, the state used money under AoA's new National Family Caregiver Support Program to expand eligibility for the program to anyone caring for an older adult family member—such as older Americans suffering from chronic illness or stroke. In 2002, the Area Agency on Aging will implement a new voucher program in four more counties. Under the new program, vouchers will be provided directly to caregivers, caregivers will have the option of hiring relatives and friends for their caregiving services.

Intervention

When the program was initiated, the care manager, a registered nurse, was assigned by the Area Agency on Aging (AAA) to work with each family. Now, the AAA subcontracts the

program, including the reimbursement of service providers, to a private agency, Pace, Inc. The subcontractor uses a social worker as the care manager. The care manager provides the family with a handbook of approved service providers, along with one book of vouchers worth a total of \$500. Once those vouchers are spent, the family receives a second book of equal value. Each voucher is worth \$10, \$20, or \$50. There are three copies of each voucher: one kept by the caregiver for his/her records, and two given to the service provider. The service provider in turn keeps one copy for his/her records and submits the second copy to Pace for reimbursement.

As *Legacy Express* has evolved, so has the range of service options available. As one interviewee noted, "It's okay to have vouchers for services, but it's important to have services to use the vouchers on." The vouchers can be used for home modifications, such as the

The care manager gives the family a book of vouchers that can be redeemed for services.

installation of grab bars and the purchase of raised toilet seats and transfer benches. They can also be used at drug

stores to purchase medications or pharmaceutical supplies, including incontinence products. Additional services range the gamut from in-home respite and adult day care to basic lawn care and senior center home-delivered meals. Care managers have the authority to add a service to the list if a family can show it will be of help, and the program has continued to add both services and new providers. In late 2001, two new providers were awarded contracts to provide respite during weekends and overnight.

Referrals to the program can come from various sources, including public health wellness centers, and many people have learned about the program by word of mouth. People also learned about *Legacy Express* from a statewide publicity program run by the state's 12 AAAs to direct consumers to sources of information about care options. When someone is referred to the AAA for any reason, the AAA performs a telephone assessment to learn if the person needs additional services. If someone calls seeking hot meals for his/her grandmother, for example, additional services may also be needed. A registered nurse visits the person's

home to interview the family and assess its needs. If they are eligible for the *Legacy Express* program, then a care manager is assigned to the family.

Implementation

Legacy Express first served people in 1998 in Hall, Habersham, Dawson and White Counties. Three implementation challenges bear noting. First, many families were reluctant to accept assistance, in part due to the perceived stigma of receiving "free help". In addition, the program had to overcome some trust issues with families after initially selecting a case manager who was not from their north Georgia community. These problems have been greatly alleviated as the case manager built rapport with people in the community and as the program gained broader acceptance.

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Second, many families spend less than expected. Case managers have been challenged to persuade families to purchase the services, even though the need for these services is the reason families received the vouchers. A number of participants view the vouchers as "rainy day money" that gives them peace of mind. This spending pattern has also posed a challenge to program administrators, who must figure out how to allocate dollars. In addition, program administrators quickly recognized that they needed to stamp the vouchers with an end-of-fiscal-year expiration date, or face unexpected expenditures months later when families finally use their vouchers.

The final significant issue is the potential tax consequences of providing vouchers (effectively money) to caregivers for purchasing services. In the original program, *Legacy Express* avoided this issue since the program only allowed caregivers to give vouchers to businesses, not to individuals. The new four-county voucher program, starting in 2002, will allow families to give vouchers to individuals who provide assistance to the person. Tax code issues related to caregivers receiving vouchers are being examined.

Impact

Anecdotal evidence suggests that participants like the program and its flexibility. In addition, participants in focus groups indicated that they did not know what they would have done had the program not existed. Program staff report the program provides critical support to people who are not receiving services under a Medicaid home and community-based services (HCBS) waiver.

Legacy Express also provides a broader range of services than Georgia's Medicaid HCBS waiver for older people and people with disabilities. Legacy Link will evaluate the new, expanded voucher program's effectiveness using the Caregiver Support and Satisfaction Survey, an instrument currently in use by states participating in the Administration on Aging's Performance Outcome Measurement Project.

For the period from July-December 2001, voucher expenditures under the *Legacy Express* program totaled slightly over \$18,000. The program is designed to be very small, with perhaps 35-50 families enrolled at any time. Families used 59 percent of the expenditures for prescription drugs; an additional 16 percent were used for home health care. Most of the additional 25 percent were used for adaptive clothing (7 percent); personal care items (5 percent); lawn services (4 percent); nutritional supplements (4 percent); day care services (2 percent); and respite care (2 percent).

Contact Information

For more information about *Legacy Express*, contact Pat Viles Freeman, of Legacy Link at (770) 538-2655 or pvfreeman@dhr.state.ga.us.

Some Discussion Questions:

What additional implementation challenges would apply if a State used vouchers for Medicaid services?

How would a voucher program work differently in larger communities?

One of a series of reports by The MEDSTAT Group for the U.S. Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) highlighting promising practices in home and community-based services. The entire series will be available online at CMS' web site, <http://www.cms.gov>. This report is intended to share information about different approaches to offering home and community-based services. This report is not an endorsement of any practice.