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OHAC Conducts Consumer Satisfaction Survey for Medicare Advantage Special Needs Plans

Portland, OR--According to a recent survey, some Oregonians with the worst health are actually getting the most satisfactory health care.

With the help of Portland State University researchers, the Oregon Health Action Campaign (OHAC), a non-profit advocacy organization, conducted a consumer satisfaction survey of CareOregon Advantage and Trillium Community Health Plan members. Both plans are Special Needs Medicare Advantage plans, serving Oregonians receiving both Medicare and Medicaid. Patients tend to have one or more chronic illnesses, many are disabled, approximately half require specialty care, and 90 percent need prescription medicines.

OHAC received a grant from Community Catalyst to gauge patient satisfaction with their special needs plans, according to Ellen Pinney, OHAC's executive director. "There is a lot of discussion nationwide right now about Medicare, and Special Needs Plans hold a unique place in that mix since they serve patients with some of the greatest needs," said Pinney. "As health policy advocates, we wanted to determine how well these needs were being met."

"Both plans scored well above national averages for commercial, Medicaid and Medicare survey ratings reported by Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (CAHPS), the national benchmarking database," said Matthew Carlson, Ph.D., Portland State University. Describing their satisfaction, 68 percent of CareOregon Advantage and 72 percent of Trillium CHP members rated their plans as 9-10 on a scale of 0-10. This is compared to 36 percent for commercial plans, 59 for Adult Medicare and 50 percent for Adult Medicaid.

The purpose of the CareOregon and Trillium Community Health Plan Medicare Special Needs Plan Survey was to assess members' experiences with their health plan and their health care, according to Dr. Carlson. In order to assess member experiences with their care and plans, the survey examined six dimensions of satisfaction, including satisfaction with health plan customer service, access to health care, access to specialty care, access to prescription medications, member rating of health plans and ratings of special needs care coordinators.

Why is the satisfaction rating so much higher for these Special Needs Plans compared to commercial plans? "It's hard to speculate," said Pat Curran, director of business development for CareOregon Advantage. "We focus heavily on providing individualized care to members with the greatest needs and on preventive care for all members. We collaborate with members, providers, families and other agencies to develop a team that addresses the whole person, not just the latest doctor's visit. By helping a member control a chronic illness or recover from a recent

hospitalization, we can help them improve their quality of life overall, and that may be the basis for satisfaction.”

Trillium CHP also believes that member-centricity is the key. “At Trillium, we focus on our members, what they need, and how we can best help them to become more healthy,” said Dr. John Sattenspiel, medical director. “Our staff is committed to identifying each member’s special needs and responding to those needs quickly, thoroughly and in collaboration with the member, providers and community resources.”

Some of the difference may be explained by a “mode effect,” according to Dr. Carlson. The OHAC survey was by phone and the national surveys included phone and mail. “However, it is highly unlikely that all the difference is due to this, in particular because the benchmarking database includes surveys that have both telephone and mail responses,” Dr. Carlson said.

One of the most significant findings was that almost 50 percent of each plan rated their health as Fair/Poor, rather than Excellent/Very Good or Good. According to Rhonda Busek, Trillium CHP’s senior vice president of Government Affairs, this suggests that Special Needs Plans are an important option for this population and should be carefully examined as health reform unfolds.

The survey was administered by telephone to a random sample of members. More than half of the CareOregon Advantage and Trillium Medicare Special Needs Plan members surveyed were younger than 65. They were more likely to be female, and 83 percent reported having been diagnosed with a chronic illness, indicating a high level of medical need in the population. Approximately half of the population reported needing specialty care, and 90 percent said they needed prescription medications.

“The main limitation of the findings reported in this report was that so few members reported negative experiences with their plans,” Dr. Carlson said. The low numbers made it hard to accurately identify reasons for poor experiences.

“For example,” Dr. Carlson said, “90 percent of members reported receiving ALL the medical care they needed, so that identifying reasons for not receiving needed care was based on a very small number.”

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