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St. Paul's PACE prolongs senior independence

Medical, home assistance provided in service zone

BY [KEITH DARCE](#), UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

For seniors who live alone, independence can come to an abrupt end when injury or illness forces them into a nursing home.

The move can cause a painful break from the people and places they know best, and can signal the start of a rapid physical decline.

Some San Diegans are fighting off the scenario with help from an innovative program that coordinates adult day care, medical treatment, drug management, physical therapy, mental health services, home aid, housekeeping services and transportation under one roof.

They aren't the only ones benefiting from St. Paul's Program of All-Inclusive Care for the Elderly, better known as PACE. The nonprofit project, which functions like a health maintenance organization, is the only one of its kind in the county and one of 70 nationwide.

Medicare and Medi-Cal, the agencies that cover health costs for seniors, have praised these programs for working to save money not only by emphasizing preventive care but also by making it convenient. Studies have shown that aggressive and proactive case management cuts down on expensive hospitalizations and intensive stays in a nursing home.

Most seniors who live on their own typically receive health care and home assistance from a fragmented array of agencies, private groups and community organizations.

"PACE really is the only significant effort that links medical and long-term care services together really well," said Marty Lynch, chief executive officer of Lifelong Medical Care, a nonprofit in Berkeley. "You actually get the doctors and people who do the personal care and transportation working and talking together. It's pretty amazing."

St. Paul's PACE program began nearly two years ago with the opening of a center on the edge of downtown San Diego. The facility is serving 105 clients, who are at least 55 years old, and its administrators are looking to expand the project to serve 175 people.

In the long run, St. Paul's leaders hope to create another center in the South Bay and a third in East County.

Bernard Corrigan said the program saved his life.

Corrigan, 81, a native of Scotland, was living alone in a downtown apartment complex for seniors when he enrolled in PACE around March 2008.

His breathing had become increasingly laborious because of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and asbestos exposure from working in construction. The health problems left him virtually homebound, unable to do much housekeeping or prepare meals for himself.

"I thought I wouldn't last three more months," Corrigan said while taking a break from physical therapy at the PACE center on Elm Street.

"I've put on weight" since becoming a member, he said. "I was in a wheelchair, but now I'm walking. The program has helped me tremendously."

The results achieved by PACE — better medical outcomes without spending more money — are a rarity for the health system. They also align with President Barack Obama's health reform efforts, which seek to rein in costs without sacrificing patient care.

Yet PACE has been slow to catch on despite general praise from health officials and patient advocates.

The federal government and 30 states have sanctioned PACE centers, including five in California, since the first site was established in 1986.

PACE clients number about 17,000 nationally — a tiny fraction of the 70 million Americans who are 55 or older, according to the National PACE Association, an advocacy group in Alexandria, Va.

The nonprofit organizations that run these programs must collect millions of dollars in reserves before they are allowed to open a care center. St. Paul's spent nine years raising \$4.2 million in reserves before launching its facility.



Roger Berg, 69, had his blood pressure checked by Deborah Spalding, a nurse with St. Paul's Program of All-Inclusive Care for the Elderly, which provides seniors with enough help to live at home.

St. Paul's PACE prolongs senior independence continued

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Federal regulations also require that clients qualify for Medicaid (called Medi-Cal in California) — the government's health insurance program for the poor and disabled — or pay a few thousand dollars a month out of their own pockets for services.

Because PACE operates in the HMO model, participants must give up some or all of their previous physicians and switch to doctors affiliated with the program.

Membership is limited by geography: PACE participants must live within several miles of the program's main care center.

"It's not something where you can decide one day you're going to open a PACE organization, then open up shop," said Heidi Arndt, director of the division of special programs for the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. "It takes a lot of thought to develop one."

PACE participants are among the most vulnerable seniors.

Nearly all of them are poor. Many don't have family members to look after them. Their disabilities are serious enough to qualify them for nursing-home care.

"When I go into the home to enroll these people, often times I'm finding them with little to no food in their refrigerators, unable to transfer from their wheelchairs to their beds," said Amanda Dunkin, marketing director for St. Paul's PACE.

"Some of them end up sleeping in their wheelchair because they aren't receiving the physical therapy they need. Often they don't have money for medications, and because they can't get to the grocery store, they're asking neighbors to go down to the corner convenience store to buy junk food."

The PACE center in San Diego covers 7,000 square feet and includes a main room where Participants' socialize, take classes and eat lunch; a physical therapy room; and a clinic with a full-time staff of doctors and nurses.



Kandee Hunt helped Jackie Foster-Chase with her physical therapy training while occupational therapist Fern Piran (right) treated Bernard Corrigan at St. Paul's Program of All-Inclusive Care for the Elderly in San Diego.

All medical care is coordinated through the clinic which also provides specialists such as a Dentist, Podiatrist, Physiologist, Optometrist and mental health support. Due to a waiver, PACE can provide specialty services which were recently cut for seniors from Medi-Cal.

Workers in the program provide transportation, monitor diets, track medication schedules and help clients in their homes.

"Seniors in our program have straight Medi-Cal or a Medi-CAL/Medicare combo," Dunkin said. "Medi-Cal and Medicare pay PACE a capitated amount each month."

If a PACE participant is hospitalized or moved to a nursing home temporarily, the program must absorb the cost for those stays.

The arrangement creates a strong incentive for PACE operators to keep their clients healthy by taking measures such as installing handrails in homes, tracking patients' medication schedules and monitoring their diet closely.

"We really try hard to make sure they take care of themselves," Dunkin said.

The effort seems to have worked for Una Hunt, 88, of San Diego's Linda Vista neighborhood.

Before joining St. Paul's PACE, Hunt suffered a series of falls, including one outside her home while moving garbage containers.

"She fell backward, cracked her head and had to have stitches," said her daughter, Noreen Hunt.

The center's staff uses physical therapy to help Una Hunt strengthen her muscles and improve her balance.

"She hasn't fallen since she has been in the program," Noreen Hunt said.

St. Paul's PACE is located at 111 Elm Street, San Diego CA 92101. For more information call Amanda Dunkin 619.677.3800 or visit stpaulspace.org

