

Redwood Coast PACE Opens Doors; Focus is to Keep the Frail Living in Their Homes and Communities

By Carol Harrison

Humboldt County's five-year quest to open California's first rural PACE program came to fruition on Sept. 1.

"It has been a long process: a lot challenges to work through and some points that were very bleak," said Joyce Hayes, executive director of Humboldt Senior Resource Center.

"But Humboldt County now has a program that helps frail, nursing-home eligible seniors be able to stay independent in their community."

PACE is a nationally recognized comprehensive health care model that focuses on preventive care and regular health monitoring. Redwood Coast PACE is a program of Humboldt Senior Resource Center, located at 1910 California Street in Eureka (443-9747).

The long-term goal is to keep at least 130 participants as healthy and independent as possible and to help avoid or delay their placement in a skilled nursing facility.

"We are changing the way we provide health care for older adults and we are one of the first integrated social service medical models in the state," Hayes said.

Redwood Coast PACE participants receive all needed medical care and supportive services through an interdisciplinary team of clinicians and professionals led by primary care provider and medical director Dr. Jennifer Heidmann.

Primary and specialty medical care provided by Redwood Coast PACE includes vision, dental, hearing and foot care. Also included in the care continuum are home health and personal care; prescription drugs; adult day care; laboratory and diagnostic services; medical equipment and supplies; nursing; physical, occupational, speech and recreational therapy; social services and family support; transportation to and from the PACE center; and nutritional counseling, meal planning and home-delivered meals.

PACE also covers nursing home care when necessary and coordinates and covers hospitalizations, emergency and urgent care, and ambulance and paramedic services.

"What's special about PACE is that it brings all the different disciplines of health care together under one roof or community, looks closely at the needs of participants, and tries to take exquisite care of the patient and caregiver," Heidmann said.

Heidmann lost both her parents in their 60's while she was in medical school at University of Wisconsin, prompting a career-long interest in end-of-life care.

She has practiced on the North Coast for 12 years, most recently as the medical director of the hospitalist program at St. Joseph Hospital from 2010-13. Board-certified in internal medicine, she also worked in Open Door Community Health Center's hospital and ER follow-up clinic before accepting a pair of coordinated, part-time positions at Redwood Coast PACE and Hospice of Humboldt.

"What's been shown is that PACE participants are more likely to stay independent, more likely to live longer than similarly frail people who are not participating in PACE, and more likely to die in their homes instead of in a hospital or institution," Heidmann said. "They are also less likely to be hospitalized because of the care model's focus on wellness and prevention."

"The program was a godsend for me," said Trinidad's Patty Bergeron. She relied on a PACE program in Sacramento to help her care for her mother prior to moving north after her mother died.

"My mother had Lewy body dementia and various health problems, but the PACE program was able to get her all the medical and dental care – everything is inclusive," she said. "It was coordinated care, and she developed some of the best friendships that she would ever have because it got her out of the home."

Bergeron said PACE enabled her mother to stay in her own home for an additional 5 years.

"The last six years, I moved her in with me and they continued to pick her up and take her to day care while I continued to work," she said.

Bergeron worked only three more years before opting to stay at home with her mother, but even then, PACE took the lead.

"They did physical therapy during day care, did her nails, and did her hair. They gave medications and medical supplies, even the wheelchair and hospital bed. And any type of care she needed, they made sure she was transported. "

PACE even came to bathe her mother and clean and change bedding and other personal areas up until the end.

"That was probably the best 30-minute to an hour break that I will never forget," Bergeron said. "It was like having a family, and if you don't have family, that is the family that is going to take care of you. We would have moved up here nine years ago if there had been a PACE program, but all good things take time."

That is true of enrollment, too, which PACE Director and registered nurse Justine Medina describes as a month-long process to determine eligibility and devise an individualized care plan.

As of Aug. 29, Redwood Coast PACE had fielded 98 inquiries, with 12 of those either already enrolled or in the process of completing enrollment.

"We are hoping for 50 participants by December," Medina said.

In addition to being age 55 or older, PACE participants must be certified by the state to need nursing home care and able to live safely at home and in the community. They must live in the Redwood Coast PACE service area roughly defined as Trinidad to the north, Blue Lake and Carlotta to the east and Scotia to the south.

The cost of PACE participation is covered by a combination of Medicare, Medi-Cal and private payment.

A participant's share of cost, if any, depends on Medicare and Medi-Cal eligibility.

"It's a voluntary program and anybody can withdraw at any time," Hayes said. "But if a person wants to stay in PACE, we will follow them wherever their lives take them within the PACE service area. PACE gives people the choice to participate in their plan of care and receive excellent coordinated services for their home and medical needs."

Eureka's Jim Smith was the first to enroll in Redwood Coast PACE. He suffered a severe brain injury and requires around the clock care.

"Without this program, I was going to have to quit my job to care for my husband," said Liz, his wife and primary caregiver. "It's so important to have a program like PACE to help people like my husband live their lives with dignity."

Area 1 Agency on Aging paid Carol Harrison to write this story.