ASSOCIATION OF STATE AND TERRITORIAL HEALTH OFFICIALS

Access to Preventive Health Care Services for Women with Disabilities

FACT SHEET
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This fact sheet provides an overview of some of the major barriers to accessing preventive health care that women with disabilities face and provides actions state public health agencies can consider pursuing to eliminate these barriers.

Photo provided by Disabled Sports USA

Overview

Poor access to preventive health care services among people with disabilities, particularly women, is a serious public health concern. Low rates of health care usage among women with disabilities can lead to decreased health status, including the delayed treatment of chronic illness and failure to prevent secondary conditions. State public health agencies have a role in assuring access to care among this underserved population.

- Individuals with disabilities comprise approximately 21 percent of the overall U.S. population, and women with disabilities account for 53 percent of this figure.
- Statistics indicate that more than 10 million women in the U.S. are limited by some type of disabling condition including orthopedic conditions, osteoarthritis, hearing and speech impairments, paralysis, cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, spina bifida and cystic fibrosis.[1]
- By 2040, the population of women aged 65 and older are expected to number 40.8 million. This will lead to a greater number of women who are affected by disabling chronic health conditions.[2]

Barriers to Access

Widespread barriers to accessing health care services for women with disabilities exist, including:

- the higher cost of specialized care and equipment utilization for women with disabilities;
- the lack of appropriate equipment and facilities for women with physical limitations (such as mammogram machines and adjustable gynecological exam tables);
- the shortage of adequate transportation or support services to assist women in getting to health care appointments;
- inadequate knowledge about disability issues by some health care providers;
- the lack of systematic data documenting the prevalence or incidence of health problems among women with disabilities; and
- disparities in educational resources, lower wage jobs, and higher unemployment rates that may disproportionately affect women with disabilities from achieving optimal health status.[3]

Health Care Issues

Research shows that health care providers may only concentrate on health issues related to a woman's disability, thereby neglecting to screen and counsel for other health conditions. Failure to provide comprehensive preventive services for women with disabilities can have significant implications on their health.

Data suggest that women with disabilities have much higher rates of obesity than women in the general population.[4] Alcohol and tobacco use are also more likely to be higher among this population due to factors such as social isolation, chronic pain, and increased dependence on prescription drugs. For women, substance abuse can have especially detrimental effects on health and well-being resulting in higher risk for sexual assault, unwanted pregnancies, and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Women with disabilities typically do not participate in substance abuse programs due to lack of targeted outreach efforts, lack of transportation, and inaccessible facilities.[5]

Breast Health

- Research shows that: women over 40 with three or more functional limitations receive mammograms 11 percent less frequently than women with no functional limitations; only 55 percent of women with one or two limitations and 50 percent with three or more limitations had a mammogram within the last two years of the research study.[6]
- Women with disabilities are usually not identified as an underserved population in breast cancer screening programs, and therefore, they are not generally targeted in breast cancer education and outreach efforts.[7]

These barriers may contribute to the delayed diagnosis and treatment of breast cancer in women with disabilities.

Reproductive Health

- Inadequate utilization of reproductive health services is a common concern for women with disabilities. According to data from the National Health Interview Survey on Disability, women with functional limitations are less likely than women without limitations to have had a Pap test within the past three years.[8]
- Reasons given for not having regular pelvic exams include not being aware of the need to have one, difficulty getting on the exam table, and difficulty finding a health care provider who is knowledgeable about their disability.
- Providers may mistakenly assume that women with disabilities are not sexually active, especially if the disability is severe or disfiguring. Therefore, this population often is not screened for STDs, given regular gynecological exams, or advised about healthy pregnancies.[9]

Mental Health

- Women with disabilities generally experience a greater number of risk factors that are associated with mental health conditions such as isolation, poverty, and limited social support.
- Women with disabilities may be more likely to experience depression, elevated stress levels, and other emotional disturbances; however, mental health research has traditionally not focused on this subgroup.
- Mental health needs may be overlooked as a result of emotional problems being misdiagnosed or not diagnosed at all.[10]

Summary and Recommendations

State public health agencies have an important role in assuring access to affordable, high-quality health care services for women with disabilities. Among the strategies that states may consider are:

- Working with providers to ensure accessible medical equipment and facilities to make preventive and curative care available to women with disabilities;
- Including women with disabilities in the planning, reporting, and evaluation of topics such as medical reimbursement, health service delivery, community planning, communication and transportation;
- Targeting women with disabilities in all health promotion, preventive health and mental health outreach and programs;
- Educating women with disabilities about the importance of preventive health services;
- Facilitating partnerships with other state agencies, including mental health, social services, Medicaid, and transportation to coordinate efforts to increase services for women with disabilities; and
- Working with other agencies to ensure an integrated system of accessible, coordinated, comprehensive, and culturally competent care for women with disabilities.

References

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[3] Health Promotion for Women with Disabilities Web Site: http://www.nursing.villanova.edu/WomenWithDisabilities/welcome.htm.

[4] Brown, A.A and Gill, C.J. Women with Developmental Disabilities: Health and Aging. Current Women's Health Reports 2002, 2:219-225.

[5] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and SAMHSA's National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information. Substance Use Disorder Treatment for People with Physical and Cognitive Disabilities - Treatment Improvement Protocol, Series 29: http://www.health.org/govpubs/BKD288/29l.aspx.

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[7] Department of Health and Human Services' National Women's Health Information Center - Women with DisAbilities: http://www.4woman.gov/wwd/index.htm.

[8] Jans, L., Stoddard, S. Chartbook on Women and Disability in the United States. An InfoUse Report, 1999. Washington, DC: US Department of Education, National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research. http://www.infouse.com/disabilitydata/womendisability.htm

[9] Department of Health and Human Services' National Women's Health Information Center - Women with DisAbilities: http://www.4woman.gov/wwd/index.htm.

[10] Ibid.

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