

## **The Stroke Survivors' Association of Ottawa evaluates a Stroke Community Navigation Service**

SSAO frequently receives calls from stroke survivors and family members who have questions about services in the region and how to access these services. Former board member, Sharon Anderson, and executive director, Janet McTaggart wondered if a *navigation service* might be helpful for stroke survivors in Ottawa.

Patient navigation is a service that began in cancer care. Cancer care navigators help people access diagnostic services, and assist them to organize their care after a cancer diagnosis. Sharon and Janet envisioned a similar but expanded service for stroke survivors, a service that would help stroke survivors access both health and community services.

With funding from the Ontario Stroke System, Sharon, Janet and Mary Egan, a professor in the Occupational Therapy Program at the University of Ottawa, designed a project to design and evaluate a Community Stroke Navigation service.

During this project, the Community Stroke Navigator, an occupational therapist with experience in stroke care, visited and interviewed each participant and care partner (where present) and asked them about their greatest concerns at this point in time. She also reviewed their community re-integration needs and noted indicators of depression or other emotional distress. She then synthesized all of the information to come up with a plan of action for addressing these needs.

Forty-one stroke survivors and 32 care partners participated in this project. They expressed concern regarding a broad range of issues related to health, health maintenance, health care, rehabilitation, home support and other social services, housing, income support and community re-integration.

Services provided by the Stroke Community Navigator included:

- informing stroke survivors and their care partners about community programs
- connecting stroke survivors with health care and service providers (e.g., CCAC, Aphasia Centre)
- assisting stroke survivors and care partners to determine how best to use available resources (e.g., how to find physiotherapists with stroke expertise to maximize effects of available therapy sessions).
- accompanying stroke survivors to appointments when support was needed (e.g., first visit to a new community program, key meetings with decision-makers).

Approximately 4 months after starting to receive navigation services, stroke survivors, on average, demonstrated appreciable gains in community integration. During follow-up interviews, many participants spoke of how navigation had been helpful to them. Specifically, they appreciated:

- emotional and informational support from someone who was highly knowledgeable regarding stroke (extremely important to both stroke survivor and care partner).
- that the Community Stroke Navigator focused on abilities and inspired hope for the future.
- basic information regarding stroke and simple things that the stroke survivor and care partner could do to increase health, safety and comfort.
- knowledge shared regarding community programs, including those related to socialization and rehabilitation.
- help to organize thoughts, concerns and questions in preparation for appointments with health care providers or social service representatives.
- support and advocacy provided by the Community Stroke Navigator during accompaniment to key meetings (particularly among participants without care partners).

Community Stroke Navigation was a valuable service for many stroke survivors and their care partners. Basing this service within the Stroke Survivors' Association of Ottawa made the program highly accessible and responsive.

A full description and results of this project will be published shortly in *Topics in Stroke Rehabilitation*.

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