

Agency adds behavioral care to address growing need

By **STEPHANIE KALINA METZGER**
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By the middle of the century the number of Americans 65 years and older will nearly double, according to Census Bureau statistics. With these burgeoning numbers come challenges, like meeting the multi-faceted needs of a greying population, 20 percent of whom will experience some kind of mental health concern, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

LifeSpring In Home Care of Eastern PA, which provides services to individuals in Northampton, Lehigh and surrounding counties, is addressing those issues by adding a full-time, board-certified behavioral health registered nurse to its staff.

"This past year has been one of significant growth and one thing we've learned is that many of our homebound patients can benefit from additional mental health support and their families can benefit from education about how to manage their loved one's condition," said Andrew Kay, president and owner of LifeSpring. "Whether they are suffering from depression, Alzheimer's, dementia, or just declining with issues of isolation and aging, our patients' mental health status is crucial to their overall health and well-being and we are proud to offer a full spectrum of support."

MEETING A NEED

William Wise, the nurse who works as LifeSpring's director of behavioral health, said there is an increase in depression across all demographics and behavioral care services are in short supply.

"So few agencies in the area provide such services," he said.

Wise, who has 33 years of experience in the field, worked at St. Luke's before accepting the job at LifeSpring.

"I was impressed that they were providing behavioral health services," he said. As to why depression is on the upswing, Wise said it's complicated, adding: "People don't talk face-to-face much anymore and there are often communication problems. LifeSpring recognizes that the entire family can be affected."

HOW IT WORKS

Wise first meets with each patient to create an individualized plan of action.

"I'll go in and do an assessment, observe their interactions and review their medications," said Wise, adding that medications often are to blame for adverse behavior. He tells the story of an elderly patient who was spitting while eating dinner at a facility. It turned out that a change in medication was enough to stop the behavior.

Wise works with patients and their families to create short- and long-term goals, which often include socialization.



Andrew M. Kay, left, is owner and president of LifeSpring In Home Care of Eastern PA. William Wise, right, recently joined the home-care agency as director of behavioral health services. PHOTO/SUBMITTED

"I meet with those who are having adjustment problems moving into a facility and the worst thing about isolation is that it leads to negative thinking," said Wise. For those patients, Wise might enlist the assistance of a gregarious resident to draw out a new resident during the dinner hour to make him or her feel more comfortable.

Wise said he feels as if he's providing an important service to his patient, from offering guidance, to lending an ear, to helping them cope. He recognizes that it's all part of treating the whole person. "We at LifeSpring have a commitment to dealing with mental health and the owners really put together a good team of professionals," said Wise.

At the moment, approximately one third of LifeSpring's 100 patients receive behavioral health services and Kay said he is hoping to offer more services to the community in the future.

A BIG HELP

Behavioral care services are a godsend to many, said Kim Garrison, president of Lehigh Valley Aging in Place, a coalition of nonprofits and businesses that work with seniors.

"Families who are dealing with crisis situations with their aging parents and are missing work know that it doesn't just affect the caregiver of the senior, but the entire family. It's a huge benefit to be able to get mental health support," she said.

For those who choose to remain in their homes, the services can extend to helping an individual by noticing trip hazards, or pointing

out food in the refrigerator that's past its expiration date, according to Garrison.

Garrison also works as admissions and marketing director at Abington Manor Senior Living in Easton, and witnesses firsthand the benefits of behavioral services and the peace of mind they provide.

"Sometimes family members live across the country, so these kinds of services are extremely important," she said.

Dennis Geiger, who is a board member for the National Alliance on Mental Illness of the Lehigh Valley, believes that the elderly, in particular, benefit immensely from behavioral health services.

"They have specific psychological and behavioral needs as they age. Chronic health conditions, reduced ability to function as they did as independent adults, becoming dependent on others - all are major stressors," he said.

Geiger said general practitioners typically only go as far as providing medications, though more may be needed.

"Sometimes seniors need guidance that only a licensed therapist can provide," said Geiger, who works as a psychologist with the elderly.

Seniors also may need encouragement to find new ways of feeling meaningful to their family, or the community at large. One of his patients, who was in her 90s, felt as if she didn't have much of a future.

"I encouraged her to write to her grandchildren and her great grandchildren so they could feel connected to the aging process. She took me up on it. She said it helped her feel as if she had more of a purpose," said Geiger.