

PRESS RELEASE

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Help for Rural Alzheimer's Caregivers a Phone Call Away

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By Jennifer Schmidt

TALLAHASSEE, Fla.- Research shows that the rate of clinical depression among dementia caregivers ranges from 27 to 50 percent, making them the most distressed among the caregiver population.

That's why Robert Glueckauf, professor of medical humanities and social sciences at the Florida State University College of Medicine, has created the Alzheimer's Rural Care Healthline. ARCH is a three-phase program designed to determine the extent to which support and education provided via telephone can improve the quality of life of Alzheimer's caregivers.

The program is now open to rural Alzheimer's caregivers in North Florida and will eventually expand to other parts of the state. To participate, caregivers can simply call the project's toll-free "healthline" at (866) 778-ARCH.

During the initial phase of the project, focus groups in rural areas of the Florida Panhandle targeted health-care providers and church leaders in order to assess local caregivers' level of education about Alzheimer's and their skills for dealing with the disease. They also explored methods for soliciting referrals from rural health providers, elder care agencies and churches.

This phase of their study revealed themes of strong commitment to the community and respect for privacy.

"Dementia caregivers in rural communities have seen health-care projects come and go. They want to know that ARCH is firmly committed to helping local caregivers and working closely with local providers," Glueckauf said.

Caregivers also expressed a strong desire to help shape the program to meet their needs, and that's exactly what ARCH plans to do.

The second phase of the study involves dementia care workshops, which are open to rural health-care providers, caregivers and anyone affected by Alzheimer's. The workshops provide an overview of who is at risk for Alzheimer's, diagnostic methods, current treatments and the psychosocial and health consequences on both the patient and the caregiver.

Attendees are asked to refer caregivers to the toll-free number for telephone-based intervention for depression, the third phase of the project. The telephone intervention consists of 12 weekly sessions, including seven group sessions on relaxation, problem-solving skills and stress management and five individual caregiver goal-setting and implementation sessions.

Those participating in the study will be randomly assigned to one of two groups: skill building or routine education

and support. Participants receiving routine education and support will have the option of taking the skill-building program after they complete the study.

Recent research has shown that skill-building interventions for Alzheimer's caregivers delivered in hospital or health care settings lead to emotional and psychological improvements, including reduced caregiver burden and depression, and that these improvements are greater than those obtained from usual medical care. The question that Glueckauf plans to address is whether the same results can be obtained over the telephone in the homes of rural caregivers. If the program works, it will provide a convenient, low-cost alternative for distressed rural caregivers.

Glueckauf hopes to extend the ARCH program to all of Florida and help improve the quality of life of Alzheimer's caregivers and their loved ones with the condition.

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