“How many of you think you’ll work with older adults?” I ask a classroom of pre-med undergraduates. Two hands go up. “All of you should raise your hand,” I tell them, and provide them with a few statistics on the growing older population. This is just the beginning of our unique training program designed to increase empathy for older adults.

The Aging Empathic Program funded through the AZ-GWEP is one of the most popular trainings provided by the Arizona Center on Aging (ACOA). Increasing demand in the past year has led us to adapt our program to include training more instructors for the Aging Empathic Program.

The one-hour interactive training uses simulations and discussion to highlight common physical and emotional changes that can occur with aging. Topics covered include hearing, vision, smell, taste, touch, and issues such as falls, elder abuse, loss and depression. A key part of the training includes specific tips to improve the patient experience, such as communicating with an older adult with hearing loss.

The Aging Empathic Program can be adapted to meet the needs of the group — whether health professionals or community volunteers. Since July 1, AZ-GWEP staff have trained about 500 individuals, including health professions students (nursing, pharmacy and the entire second-year class at the UA College of Medicine—Tucson), clinical staff of a federally qualified community health center on the Arizona/Mexico border, hospice volunteers, Area Agency on Aging staff and volunteers, and care staff at an assisted living facility.

Additionally, about twenty empathic trainers have been trained to extend the reach and sustainability of the program. At Banner—Peoria, which serves residents of planned retirement communities northwest of Phoenix, sixteen staff were trained as trainers, and the group was provided a starter kit of materials as a first step toward implementing the empathic training across Banner’s facilities.

“I do this every single day. Never did I have any idea what the vision, arthritis, and hearing loss, was like, and how it impacted everything right down to filling out patient paperwork.” said Dr. Sarah Payne, geriatrician and physician lead at Banner Peoria Clinic. “It made me re-think a lot of how we do things in our clinic. My hope is that this will directly impact patient care in a positive way.”
Student clinic in assisted living provides education, meaning

By Hannah Stocker Cioltan, MPH
AZ-GWEP Program Coordinator

Waking early on Saturday may seem a tall order for busy health professions graduate students. But that hasn’t deterred nearly 40 students each month from participating in the interprofessional education and practice (IPEP) geriatric training clinic at St. Luke’s Home in Tucson.

Initiated in 2014, this popular clinic operates one Saturday a month from 7:30 a.m. to noon, and provides future clinicians a chance to work across disciplines to address screening and health care needs of between one and three geriatric patients. Each team consists of four or five students from the University of Arizona’s Colleges of Medicine, Pharmacy, Public Health and Nursing, and Arizona State University’s School of Social Work, and is supervised by faculty members of these programs.

St. Luke’s, a 60-unit assisted living home for low-income elders, uses the Eden Alternative® Model to promote quality of life and self-determinism. The clinics are structured in alignment with this philosophy to ensure they are mutually beneficial for both residents and students.

After participating in the interprofessional clinic, the residents of St. Luke’s state they have an enhanced sense of self-worth from contributing to students’ educational experiences. Participating students report that the clinics provide a deeper understanding of person-centered care for older adults, improved their communication skills, increased their knowledge of aging-related health issues, and increased their awareness of how to use the skills of other health professionals.

“St. Luke’s is an incredibly valuable program for all health profession students,” one student said. “I feel that this should be a required activity among all students. We learn so much from the elders and each other.”

Resources for providers, caregivers expanded under AZ-GWEP

Get “just in time” information on geriatric syndromes, conditions and issues from single-page, high impact and FREE Elder Care and Care Partner sheets.

Elder Care provider sheets are written for health professionals and students, such as physicians, pharmacists, nurses and social workers.

Care Partner pages are written for community health workers, certified nursing assistants, home health aides, and patients. They are available in English and Spanish.

Elder Care and Care Partner are available on our website: www.aging.arizona.edu. They are also available through regular email dissemination. To sign up go to: https://is.gd/arizonaGWEP.

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