

# Gatekeepers:



## *Looking Out for Seniors, One at a Time*

**By Bonnie Rosenstock**

A bank manager was worried about one of his clients. The man, in his 80s, seemed to be withdrawing an inordinate amount of money from his account and talking about visiting parents.

A cashier in a local supermarket suspected that an aide who was working for a senior was buying too much food and wondered if this was a case of abuse.

A cashier at a fast-food outlet was concerned that a regular customer who sat by himself might be isolated. Because all three employees' companies participated in VillageCare's Gatekeeper Program, they knew who to call to voice their concerns.

That's precisely the aim of the Gatekeeper Program — to train non-traditional sources to identify and refer older adults who appear to be at risk. The program was developed in 1978 by Mental Health's Elder Services in Spokane, Washington. Since its inception, it has been replicated nationally and internationally.

"The model was successful," program coordinator of the Gatekeeper Program, Charles Anflick said. "It reduced hospital and suicide rates with low-tech intervention and available resources."

The VillageCare program, which began in May 2008, is funded by the New York State Office of Mental Health and is one of three pilot programs statewide; the others are in Westchester and Onondaga counties. St. Vincent's Hospital was awarded the original grant, and they asked VillageCare to provide some of the services.

"We partnered with St. Vincent's because they had the requisite behavioral health license and an outpatient mental health clinic. We had a stronghold in the Village and Chelsea communities, and they had the stronghold in Chinatown. It was a no-brainer," said Renee Cottrell, the program's supervisor.

After St. Vincent's closed, Gatekeeper started collaborating with FECS, a nationally recognized not-for-profit health and human services organization. "St. Vincent's had a good behavioral health department, good therapists and good doctors," noted Anflick. "FECS is similar regarding referrals to mental health services."

The program reaches out to those who

have signs of depression, anxiety, confusion or other mental health issues before these conditions compromise their ability to live independently.

As VillageCare's ten-page training handout informs, "If you consider yourself the kind of person who keeps an eye on your neighbors, you are a Gatekeeper." Gatekeepers are employees at local businesses, such as banks, supermarkets, drugstores, hair salons and food establishments. They are also nurses, home health aides, clergy, police officers, firefighters, paramedics, utility or postal workers, apartment managers, doormen, neighbors, friends, relatives, concerned strangers, or anyone who comes into contact with older adults on a regular basis.

According to statistics from the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, some 366,000 adults 55 and older in New York City are affected by a psychiatric disorder or substance abuse. About 17 percent of older adults have substance abuse issues, and one in every five over 55 experiences a mental disorder, a figure which is expected to double by 2030.

The Gatekeeper Program links people to mental health treatment and other services through their partners in the community, imparts basic information about mental illness and follows up by phone, home visits and assessments.

"We try to screen each client," explained Anflick. "There are screens for alcohol abuse and for mental status. After a client is in treatment, we again give them the screening and the score should go down, meaning the person is less depressed or anxious. We have seen scores go down to zero."

Senior centers in the neighborhood are a good source for referrals. Social workers and other employees at the centers have direct knowledge of those individuals they believe are at risk. "Senior centers are more successful in bringing them to services because the clients are right here. In other situations, there are always confidentiality issues," noted Anflick.

Added Cottrell, "One of the challenges of the program is that when you are working with libraries or merchants, they need to look out for their customers and policies. The referral process is challenging,

but not impossible. Sometimes we get a physical description and 'she lives in the building,' or 'he comes in on such and such a day,' and we try to follow up."

Banks can't give out personal information, so Anflick has to work around it. The bank manager in the above-cited case had a handy, wallet-sized yellow plastic card describing the Gatekeeper Program and signs of mental health distress and called Anflick when the client came into the bank. "I gave the manager information about who to call, to find out who his relatives are. The client is now in a nursing home."

Anflick sees an average of five people daily, is actively involved with 30 cases, follows up on people he hasn't seen for a while and arranges training with potential Gatekeepers. He has reached out to the local NYPD precincts — the Sixth at 233 W. 10th St. in the West Village and the Ninth at 321 E. 5th St. in the East Village. He also has gone to community board meetings, social services meetings, the Greenwich Village/Chelsea Chamber of Commerce, the Jefferson Market Library and local houses of worship, to name a few.

A supermarket chain has been especially receptive. Anflick has already trained managers, delivery people and some cashiers and is training more.

If the clients that he refers for mental health treatment (and other services) don't have coverage, Anflick, who is trained in problem solving and short-term counseling, will work with them in the interim to improve their depression scores until the team can identify an appropriate provider. "It's a matter of keeping up with the changing systems and new services that the city is offering," said Anflick, whose database is growing quickly.

Because of VillageCare's wide network of community-based services and facilities, the team can also offer services from the organization's own programs, such as Certified Home Health Care, adult day health care and licensed home care.

"We're another link in the chain to what they want," Cottrell said. "The program is a low-cost method of intervening and it helps people stay in their home. We accomplish this Gatekeeper by Gatekeeper, client by client."