Medical programs help aging residents stay in their communities

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ATLANTIC CITY — Health experts toured a new medical and multipurpose center in the city last week they hope will serve older residents’ health and social needs.

AtlantiCare LIFE Connection center will be the newest Program of All-inclusive Care for the Elderly, or PACE, in New Jersey. It will serve Atlantic and Cape May county residents who need medical care and other services and want to delay or avoid moving into nursing homes or long-term care facilities.

PACE is a federally funded, state-administered program for Medicare- and Medicaid-eligible seniors 55 and older who require a nursing-home level of care, but want to and are able to independently live safely in their communities.

AtlantiCare’s new center, based in the William L. Gormley AtlantiCare HealthPlex, becomes the state’s sixth PACE location. Inspira Health Network opened its LIFE Center for residents in Cumberland, Salem and Gloucester counties in 2011.

“The center helps us connect with older adults and help them get the most out of life in their last years of life,” said Dr. Richard Stefanacci, AtlantiCare program medical director. “Rose (a PACE participant) passed away at 92, not in a hospital or nursing home, but at her home. She was able to celebrate the last two years of her life with loved ones and with a purpose.”

What makes PACE centers different from community senior centers is that all services, including primary care, dental, prescribing, activities, nutrition care, transportation and personal care at home, are coordinated by a team of experts and paid for by Medicare and Medicaid.

Paul Sullivan, New Jersey PACE coordinator at the Department of Human Services, said about 1,000 older residents are currently served by the program, which came to New Jersey in 2009. The PACE model originally developed in San Francisco in the 1970s and was adopted by Medicare in 1997.

“I live in Brigantine and I’ve already been recruiting families and I’m looking forward to having them here,” said Lori Herndon, AtlantiCare president and CEO. “Nothing is worse than knowing your loved one isn’t where they should be.”

Herndon said AtlantiCare officials had been talking about bringing a program like PACE to Atlantic City since 2009, and it took nearly seven years to secure funding and approval. The center contains medical exam rooms, a multipurpose room, a courtyard, quiet rooms and other spaces.

Planning and construction was completed in 18 months and staff currently are reviewing eligible participants. Officials said they hope to have residents using the center by Nov. 1 and expect the program to serve as many as 160 participants at a time.
Jill Viggiano, director of Inspira’s LIFE center, said one of the biggest ways the program has been successful is by providing a one-stop shop for families and their loved ones in coordinating care and services among Medicare, Medicaid, insurance, prescriptions and more.

Viggiano said she and other program experts also noticed a decrease in ER visits and hospitalizations among PACE participants. In the 12 months prior to the program, one patient had 24 ER visits, which was reduced to four in the first year the patient was enrolled in PACE.

Since the program cares for older seniors in the last years of their lives, many have been able to die at their homes surrounded by loved ones, instead of in hospitals, she said.

“It’s really become a tremendous support for family trying to keep loved ones in the community, and it also benefits the individual participants as it leads to an improvement in their quality of life,” Viggiano said.