

## Aging Service Providers Play a Key Role in Promoting Better Health for Older Americans

Findings from *Integrating Social Care into the Delivery of Health Care: Moving Upstream to Improve the Nation's Health*

**Decades of research demonstrate that improving social conditions — such as access to stable income and housing, nutritious and sufficient food, appropriate health care, and reliable transportation — is critical to improving overall health across the United States and reducing disparities in health outcomes. Integrating social care into health care delivery can help achieve this goal.**

As underscored by National Academies' consensus studies — *Retooling for an Aging America* (2008), *Families Caring for an Aging America* (2016), and *Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults* (2020) — integrating health and social care is especially important for older adults, who may experience shrinking support networks and resources at the same time as their care needs become more complex.



Functional health and independence are the primary goals of care for older adults. Therefore, addressing their social needs — such as access to stable income and housing, nutritious and sufficient food, appropriate health care and reliable transportation — is a key component of addressing their health care needs.

Gerontologists and other aging service providers improve the quality of life and promote the well-being of people as they age within their families, communities, and societies through research, education, and application of interdisciplinary knowledge of the aging process and aging population.

In addition, community-based organizations (CBOs) have long provided social services and care to older Americans and their caregivers that enable people to stay in their homes as they age. CBOs, supported by a nationwide network of Area Agencies on Aging, provide community case management, home-delivered meals, and caregiver respite to aging populations. CBOs also provide other relevant services for older adults, such as health promotion programs, social support groups, in-home care, mental health care, or intergenerational programs.

## How Gerontologists Can Promote Social Care Integration

Across the nation, health care systems are working to integrate social care into health care delivery so they can improve health for all. Gerontologists and other aging service providers have important roles to play in this mission, and there are a number of ways they can help to promote social care integration:

### Being part of team-based care

To integrate social care into their work with older patients, health care systems need interprofessional teams that include gerontologists, who are experts in addressing the unique needs of older people. Interprofessional teams need to have clearly defined roles and be trained to work together well within the complex and shifting landscape of health-related social care.

### Learning how to integrate care

Education and training plays a big role in the understanding of how to integrate social care into health care and why its so important to improve health.



- **“Interprofessional education” in which social care providers** — including gerontologists — and health care workers learn with, about, and from each other, will enable them to work well together in providing “whole person care.”
- **Gerontology programs should educate students** about social determinants of health and health disparities, as well as effective models that integrate gerontology and health care delivery to address social care needs.
- **Schools of health and social service professions should engage social care providers** — including gerontologists — in instructional roles to model their participation in interprofessional teams and to provide information on social risk screening and social care resources and referrals.

### Standardizing practice and payment

Gerontologists can advise health care organizations, state and federal government institutions, as well as professional associations, on how to develop, expand, and standardize their scope of practice. These are important steps toward integrating gerontologists into health care delivery and ensuring quality of care.