

## AgeWell program living up to its name

*Editor's note: This story is a collaboration between [Erika Beras](#) of 90.5 WESA, and [Kris B. Mamula](#).*

Elfi Rook, a spry 88-year-old woman who was born in Austria and survived internment in a Nazi concentration camp, participates in a variety of programs offered by the Jewish Community Center. Canasta and bridge are among her favorite pastimes, but she seeks out anything that will challenge her to use her mind.

“I feel at home here,” said Rook, who began using JCC’s services shortly after moving to Pittsburgh 11 years ago. “I come here quite a bit.”

Four Squirrel Hill-based social service agencies, including JCC, have been trying for years to keep the elderly like Rook healthy and independent as long as possible. Now, they have proof their approach works.

“Our secret sauce is our close working relationship between the staffs of different disciplines,” said Jordan Golin, director of clinical services at Squirrel Hill Psychological Services, part of Jewish Family & Children’s Service of Pittsburgh. “There are some very good providers out there, but the team approach is something that not a whole lot of providers are doing.”

AgeWell Pittsburgh is a one-stop referral system that provides coordinated access to a variety of social services for seniors, including fitness and home care, which are designed to keep seniors active and involved. The program serves about 5,600 people, and its sponsors are JFCS, JCC, Jewish Association on Aging and Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh. It is open to all seniors, regardless of religion.

The program has been proving its worth in allowing seniors to live in their homes as long as possible while holding down overall health care costs.

Hospital and nursing home admission rates for AgeWell clients were lower — and sometimes significantly lower — than the estimated rates for other Medicare recipients in Pittsburgh and nationwide for the 11-month period ending March 31. The new comparison tool was developed in cooperation with the University of Pittsburgh.

Some specifics: AgeWell clients reported an estimated 28 emergency department visits per 100 clients per year, fewer than half the estimated 68 emergency room visits per 100 Medicare recipients elsewhere in Pittsburgh and 55 visits per 100 Medicare clients nationwide.

Hospital admissions also were lower for AgeWell recipients — an estimated 27 inpatient admissions per 100 clients per year, well below the estimated 39 admissions per 100 Medicare recipients in Pittsburgh and lower than the estimated 30 admissions per 100 Medicare recipients nationwide.

The results were even better for nursing home admissions. AgeWell clients had an estimated two skilled nursing admissions per 100 clients per year, well below the estimated 12 admissions per 100 Medicare recipients in Pittsburgh and eight admissions per 100 clients per year among Medicare recipients nationwide.

“It’s really a virtual organization rather than a program,” JFCS President and CEO Aryeh Sherman said. “Community-based programs are the least expensive way to help seniors live out their years.”

In addition, AgeWell has begun closely cooperating with Squirrel Hill Health Center. The health center, the first medical provider in the consortium, recently began piloting AgeWell’s risk-assessment tool, which flags seniors who are in danger of hospitalization or nursing home admission, according to CEO Susan Friedberg Kalson.

“We’re delighted to be working with them,” she said.

The program is an example of a patient-centered medical neighborhood, according to Dr. Keith Kanel, chief medical officer at the **Pittsburgh Regional Health Initiative**, a nonprofit advocacy group that works to find ways to prevent unnecessary hospitalizations.

“It’s a program where you can look at all the patient’s needs, which may be nutritious, behavioral or social,” he said. “You can meet the patient where they are and provide exactly what they need and when they need it.”

Kris Mamula covers health care, insurance and employee benefits for the [Pittsburgh Business Times](https://www.pittsburghbusiness.com). Contact him at [kmamula@bizjournals.com](mailto:kmamula@bizjournals.com) or 412-208-3825.