

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**Data Profile of South Amboy/Laurence Harbor Details
Rates of Depression, Related Health Conditions in Sandy-hit Area**

**Federal Project to Improve Behavioral Health Services for Medicare Recipients Will Help
Prepare for Future Disasters**

EAST BRUNSWICK, NJ — Some older adults and disabled residents in the South Amboy and Laurence Harbor community may be at increased risk of deteriorating health, depression, anxiety/adjustment disorders, and isolation as a result of Superstorm Sandy. A new behavioral health profile, developed by Healthcare Quality Strategies, Inc. (HQSI), the federally designated healthcare quality improvement organization for New Jersey, provides data that can help determine the storm's impact on key depression risk factors.

The South Amboy/ Laurence Harbor community profile is one of 10 community and 10 county profiles developed as part of an ambitious Medicare-funded project, *Enhancing Coordination of Behavioral Health Services after Superstorm Sandy: Planning for Future Disasters*. The profiles focus on areas hardest hit by the storm.

The project aims to help local communities understand how the storm affected the behavioral health of older adults and the disabled, as well as plan for future disasters. Another goal is to encourage greater use of depression screening, a covered service for Medicare beneficiaries that can help identify those with deteriorating health related to depression.

HQSI used Medicare claims and other data to analyze rates of depression and related disorders, and the use of behavioral health services, among Medicare fee-for-service beneficiaries living in selected communities during the 21-month period prior to October 2012. For example, the data shows that in the South Amboy and Laurence Harbor community during this period:

- 20.6 percent of Medicare Fee For Service beneficiaries experienced depression or related disorders, such as anxiety or adjustment disorders.
- In the South Amboy/Laurence Harbor community, 16.8% of Medicare FFS beneficiaries were at risk for depression or proxy disorders.
- The South Amboy/Laurence Harbor community had higher rates of substance or alcohol abuse or tobacco use (11.5%), alcohol or substance abuse (3.9%), and substance abuse (2.1%) than Middlesex County.
- As in all the selected communities, use of the Medicare depression screening benefit in the South Amboy/Laurence Harbor community for calendar year 2012 was low, less than 2 percent per 1,000 Medicare beneficiaries.

“Collecting this baseline data is the first step toward understanding how Superstorm Sandy affected the behavioral health of Medicare recipients,” said HQSI Quality Improvement Specialist Nicole Skyer-Brandwene, MS, RPh, BCPS. HQSI plans to update the profile with post-Superstorm Sandy data in early spring to determine the impact of the storm on behavioral health issues and services.

HQSI is reaching out to community leaders and mayors in South Amboy/Laurence Harbor to discuss how this data can help increase the rate of depression screening and support a community-based approach to behavioral health services after a disaster.

“Older adults are especially vulnerable to physical and behavioral health issues after a disaster and, unlike other conditions, behavioral health issues are often under-diagnosed,” said Ms. Skyer-Brandwene. “Unfortunately, in our society, the stigma associated with behavioral or mental health may prevent people from seeking care. Since depression can also affect physical health, screening is an important health tool. That’s why we want to spread the word that depression screening is a covered Medicare benefit.”

The community profiles, and the county profiles HQSI developed for the New Jersey counties declared federal disaster areas after Superstorm Sandy, are available at www.hqsi.org.

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About HQSI

Healthcare Quality Strategies, Inc. partners with healthcare providers, organizations, communities, and consumers to make healthcare safer, more efficient, and more effective. Working under contract with the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS), an agency of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, HQSI is the nonprofit federally designated quality improvement organization (QIO) for New Jersey. Its methods include assessing opportunities for improvement, sharing best practices, and designing strategies with

measurable and sustainable results. The goal is for consumers to receive high-quality, patient-centered care with the best possible outcomes. Learn more about HQSI at www.hqsi.org.