THE HOME CARE RESEARCH INITIATIVE: A PROGRAM OF THE ROBERT WOOD JOHNSON FOUNDATION

POLICY BRIEF

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Improving Communication Between Researchers and Policy Makers in Long-Term Care Or "Researchers are from Mars; Policy Makers are from Venus"

This policy brief reports the results of a study that examined how policy makers acquire information about long-term care (LTC) and why research findings in the field often don't filter through to them. It describes the "brokers" that provide LTC research information to policy makers and outlines what can be done to make certain such information reaches policy makers and is suited to their needs. It concludes by recommending that more effort be put into disseminating LTC research information, both to communicate more effectively within the resource constraints that currently exist and to encourage increased investment in research brokering activities for the future.

Who provides LTC research information to policy makers?

Many different groups disseminate LTC research (*see Table 1 on next page*). These groups, called "information brokers," often act as middlemen, mediating between research producers and research users. In LTC, however, research "producers" often act as brokers themselves, supplying research directly to policy makers.

Brokers' ability to make research information accessible to their audience depends on a number of factors:

- **The extent and focus of their interest in LTC.** LTC, or certain aspects of it, may be only one among many areas of interest or involvement for a broker.

What we did

In the fall of 2000, staff from the Home Care Research Initiative (HCRI) conducted an "environmental scan" of the market for LTC research information. Thirty-four interviews were conducted with: 1) senior state LTC policy makers; 2) representatives of constituent groups representing policy makers; 3) LTC researchers; and 4) representatives of "broker groups," organizations that disseminate evidence-based policy relevant information. We also conducted a group discussion with six researchers in LTC and some supplementary interviews. Our preliminary findings were discussed during HCRI's annual meeting in December 2000; the results of these discussions were incorporated into our final document.

• **How they define their audience.** The audience may be limited to members of a given organization or may include a broader group of advocates or decision-makers.

• **The type of information they disseminate.** Brokers may focus on technical assistance, academic research, or the reporting of policy-relevant events and legislative activities.

• **The level of resources available for research translation & dissemination.** Financing can heavily influence both the subject the broker specializes in and the dissemination activities undertaken.

• **The mechanisms used.** Brokers may use a variety of communication vehicles, such as: one-on-one communication; meetings; printed materials, including academic journals, reports, policy briefs, and newsletters; email communication; web sites; or a combination of methods.

Table 1: Types of information brokers

- **Government agencies, which often fund or themselves conduct research**
- **Foundations, such as the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Commonwealth Fund or the Kaiser Family Foundation, which fund research**
- **University research centers that conduct their own research, such as the Heller Graduate School at Brandeis University**
- **For-profit and not-for-profit research centers that conduct research, including consulting firms, advocacy groups, and think tanks**
- **Individual researchers**
- **Bridging organizations, which aim explicitly to bring together researchers and policy makers**
- **Constituent organizations, organizations that disseminate research findings to serve a membership**

Features of the LTC brokering environment

The LTC brokering environment suffers from the inadequate financial support that characterizes all aspects of LTC. Thus, **brokering activities devoted to LTC are often sporadic**. Few organizations that focus on LTC have the resources to do a sustained job of translating and disseminating policy-relevant research. Organizations that do have such resources rarely see LTC as a priority.

Consequently, **the brokering environment in LTC is highly fragmented**. Because the information that does exist comes from such a wide variety of sources, policy makers at both the state and federal levels have a difficult time identifying reliable sources of research information.

Policy makers may not know about the work brokers do because **state policy makers in LTC are often not a key target audience for brokers**. Brokers may have difficulty reaching out to LTC policy makers because they are hard to identify—hard, because responsibility for LTC policy is located in different agencies in different states. More importantly, many of the most effective brokers of health policy information focus on other target audiences and on other health policy issues, although there is some evidence this is changing.

Because of inadequate financing and the low priority given to dissemination of LTC information, **mechanisms for dissemination often miss the mark.**

- Many information brokers rely on academic journals, published reports, the web, or large impersonal conferences to reach their audiences–mechanisms that do not always suit policy makers.
- Some brokers–especially academic researchers–have few incentives to reach out to policy makers.
- Even non-academic researchers often conform to academic norms and formats.

There are many other reasons for the use of inappropriate dissemination mechanisms among brokers: a poorly developed infrastructure for translation and dissemination; a lack of expertise; a lack of incentives to promote good dissemination practice; and limited understanding of what constitutes good dissemination practice.

What policy makers want and need in LTC research information

Policy makers need information that takes into account the political nature of their jobs. They must be able to see how research findings will help them operate programs more effectively, address the concerns of elected officials, or better anticipate issues that are likely to arise in the future. Consequently, *the relevance of research findings to policy concerns should be made clear.* Research must be "translated" and the policy implications of research made clear–researchers need to "go out on a limb" and make recommendations based on their findings.

Policy makers need information that addresses local needs. The more *local* the information source, the more likely policy makers will use it. As one policy maker put it, *"Often the research we do, and use, is our own. Nothing works better with legislators and others than local, current information."* Policy makers also like information from those who understand their needs, such as peers from similar states and experts who understand local issues and concerns.

Table 2: Systems issues in brokering

- **Brokering activities devoted to LTC are often sporadic and funding is erratic.**
- **The brokering environment in LTC is highly fragmented**
- **State policy makers in LTC are often not a key target audience for brokers**
- **Mechanisms for dissemination often miss the mark**

Policy makers need information that is clearly presented. Policy makers have too little time and receive too much information. To be helpful to them, *information must be easy to find and interpret.* As one policy maker observed, *"optics are paramount."* Policy makers are not likely to read long documents dominated by tightly printed text. Information should be clearly presented, with graphs and tables. It should also be concise, current, point to the implications of research findings, and enable policy makers to follow up if interested. In short, format is important.

Policy makers like information that is easy to find. Consequently, *research syntheses and summaries* are useful to them. Such materials would survey a wide body of research findings to pull them together and interpret them in terms relevant to policy makers. Policy makers are not likely to browse the web or scan email distribution lists; they don't have the time to sort through undigested material.

Table 3: Barriers to improving the information environment in LTC

- **There is little institutional commitment to the importance of LTC research, reflected in a lack of funding for both research and brokering activities**
- **Researchers and policy makers speak different languages, have different motivations, and exist within different cultures**
- **Researchers and policy makers have different time horizons**
- **LTC policy making is spread out over many government entities, at both the state and federal level**
- **Turf issues can make cooperation between researchers and brokers difficult**

Well-run, focused conferences can also be helpful to policy makers. They bring important information to the attention of policy makers and provide them with space to think about it. One said, at intensive conferences *"I stretch my mind and grow"* and *"learn more in two days than I would on the web"* through the *"back and forth dialogue."* Moreover, conferences allow policy makers to maintain contact with peers and experts who are "*in the know*," providing them with efficient means of obtaining relevant information quickly.

Ways to improve the brokering environment

Increase and sustain support for research synthesis, translation, and dissemination activities. Both funders and researchers need to recognize that effective information brokering requires dedicated resources. Incentives are needed to encourage brokers and researchers alike to plan specifically for dissemination activities. Funders should be explicit about their expectations regarding translation and dissemination and willing to provide the funding and/or technical assistance to facilitate it. Through consistent funding over time, they can help brokers build expertise.

Improve vehicles for communication. Good practice in brokering needs to be supported and publicized. Brokers should attend to the needs of policy makers by addressing these needs in their products; in particular, written products should be clear, appropriate to their audience, and visually appealing. Good practice can also be promoted by

- Developing manuals on writing for policy makers, training staff to write well, and/or hiring editorial expertise.

• Conducting well-run meetings and conferences.

• Fostering relationships between local research centers and policy makers. Local research centers that have close relationships with state agencies can provide policy makers with advice that is informed by research findings and sensitive to the culture, history, and ways of doing business particular to an individual state.

Help policy makers manage the information glut. A number of techniques can be used to help policy makers identify important information. Syntheses help policy makers pull together, sort through, and make sense of the numerous research findings addressing any given topic. An on-line repository of LTC information could help policy makers identify resources more quickly. The branding of broker groups would allow policy makers to readily identify reliable sources of information.

Bridge the gaps between researchers and policy makers. Researchers and brokers should understand policy makers' needs; policy makers should understand the limits of research. Each group needs to understand the language and priorities of the other. This can be done by:

• Including policy makers early on in the design and implementation of research.

• Facilitating more movement of policy makers and researchers between their respective environments, through work placements or other mechanisms.

• Having the two groups work together to develop a common research agenda in LTC.

Strengthen system capacity to anticipate and identify emerging policy problems and issues. Policy makers seek to understand the many factors that affect their ability to shape and deliver LTC services, such as demographic changes, evidence on the efficacy of service delivery systems, models and targeted interventions, as well as methods and tools to manage services. Policy makers — together with researchers — can identify emerging problems and issues through mechanisms such as quantitative models, national surveys, key informant interviews, site visits and other qualitative methods. Expert panels, "summit" meetings, visioning and other group techniques also help identify emerging issues. Findings from these various information-producing activities should be synthesized and translated for policy makers' use.

Table 4: How to make information useful for policy makers

- **Source matters – policy makers are more likely to rely on information from trusted sources, such as peers, leaders in the field, or those with first-hand knowledge of a state's circumstances, priorities, and needs.**
- **Substance matters – policy makers are more likely to use research that is relevant to problems they are currently facing or are likely to be facing in the foreseeable future.**
- **Translation matters – policy makers are more likely to pay attention to research if the policy implications of research findings are clearly spelled out; they welcome speculation on the policy implications of research findings.**
- **Format matters – policy makers are more likely to use information that is presented in a concise, visually appealing format.**
- **Timeliness matters – policy makers prefer early, tentative results to late, definitive results.**
- **Overload matters – policy makers are overwhelmed with information; they gravitate toward mechanisms that help them select the most important information.**

Conclusion: What is to be done?

Good research alone does not improve the shape of LTC; it must be made relevant and useful to the people who make policy. Policy makers who participated in our environmental scan told us, loud and clear, that academic-quality research is not reaching them. Therefore, more effort must be devoted to the task of synthesizing, translating, and disseminating research information to them.

- Funders can contribute to this effort by considering ways to alter systematically the incentives and support provided to researchers and by committing dollars and/or technical assistance explicitly to brokering organizations and activities.
- Brokers can try to listen to policy makers' needs more carefully and focus on more effective mechanisms for communicating with them.
- And lastly, researchers can make efforts to include policy makers more directly in the process of formulating research questions and objectives, so that their research agendas more closely track the policy concerns of those who are responsible for the future of LTC.

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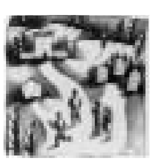

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www.vnsny.org/hcri

The Home Care Research Initiative, a program of The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, was established to support research and analysis that will improve the knowledge base underlying home care policy and practice. It is based at the Center for Home Care Policy and Research at the Visiting Nurse Service of NY.

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