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Boston University
UNIQUE COMPUTER SOFTWARE HELPS ELDERS FIND SERVICES

Boston, Mass. -- Experts estimate that 90 percent of senior citizens are unaware of the range of elderly services that exist, let alone which they qualify for. To address this problem, the University Hospital (UH) is the first site in New England to offer a free service called Benefits Eligibility Service System (BESS) -- a computer software system that can instantly inform Boston elders of their local, state and federal entitlements.

"Not knowing what services they are entitled to can cause unnecessary suffering for elders who may be faced with chronic illnesses, rent increases, and medical emergencies as they begin living on fixed incomes. The services that they are eligible for may substantially improve the quality of their lives as they age," says Mary Chin, the director of the Social Work Department at UH.

According to Chin, elders often don't have this information because of a lack of outreach from service agencies and because, for the most part, elders are unaccustomed to seeking help and unfamiliar with the benefits system. Even case-workers who work with elders do not have all the information at their fingertips. They often spend hours calculating eligibility for just one client.

With UH's new system, Boston residents over age 65 need only complete a two-page questionnaire about their personal, economic and health status and send it to the Social Work Department at UH. The information is entered into a computer, which instantly matches a client to services and prints out a report listing benefits for which the elder is eligible and directions for
applying for those entitlements.

"We believe this service will empower the elderly person," says Anna Bissonnette, the program director for UH's Elders Living at Home program, which procured the software. "With a list in hand, elders can contact the service agencies themselves, rather than waiting for a social worker to do the leg work."

The software, which has been custom-designed for Boston residents by incorporating all local and state programs as well as federal benefits, can be updated as services and eligibility requirements change.

Though UH is the first New England institution to make BESS available, the Hospital will soon be sharing it with other organizations, including Boston's Health and Hospitals and the Commission on Elderly Affairs.

Developed by United Seniors Corporation of Washington, D.C., BESS is only available in 20 sites throughout the United States.

The University Hospital, founded in 1855, is a principal teaching hospital of Boston University School of Medicine and a member of Boston University Medical Center.

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