

Caregivers Corner for June 8 2009 from Diane Cameron

The word community is often mentioned in conversations about zoning or when we talk about schools or real estate. When you read advertising copy for new developments you'd get the idea that community is a tangible thing.

But that's not true. Community is an intangible that only becomes visible when it is reflected by people and their actions. And the very best mirror in which community is reflected is service.

That is why Community is part of our name at Community Caregivers. We lend neighbors a helping hand with concrete things like rides and errands and shopping, but we are also doing something larger and intangible: We are building a caring community. One of my colleagues with a caregiver organization in Vermont likes to say, "We're teaching the community how to do what it knew how to do 100 years ago."

Community is critically important now because of the changes we face in our economy and by the impact of changing demographics in our region. We are pressed by a rapidly aging population, a decrease in formal caregivers—people like nurses, home health aides--And this is compounded by social changes that have positioned people in their 40's and 50's as what is called "sandwich caregivers" caring for people both older and younger at the same time. One in 4 families is caring for someone over 60, and the typical caregiver is 43, female, working and raising two kids *and* caring for an aging parent. Something's gotta give. What to do?

At Community Caregivers we see families asking this question every day. It is also being asked more formally by County and State governments and players in the healthcare system. There is pressure to build a new nursing home. The fantasy is that this will solve the aging “problem”. Pressure comes less directly from inside families where parents have asked and adult children have promised, “No nursing home for Mom or Dad.” In addition we have the ever independent and iconoclastic Boomers who can’t imagine being that infirm or dependent.

So the community is also asking, “What to do?”

We need to go back to that picture of 100 years ago and ask, “What did the community know how to do that we forgot?” Part of the answer is, “lending neighbors a helping hand”.

No, it doesn’t solve the whole aging problem but it’s a big piece. When agencies like Community caregivers –and we have many partners in the Capital Region—groups like Catholic Charities, Senior Services of Albany, Umbrella, Guilderland Senior Services —can mobilize volunteers and staff to help people in their homes it provides needed relief to family caregivers so that they are more able to keep Mom and Dad out of institutional care. When a family gets help with some transportation, some errands, some meals and some respite—they can make it without a nursing home experience.

Of course aging is aging. Bodies break down and serious illness is part of the package. There will be times when elderly people need more intensive medical attention and even hospitalization for serious and specific interventions. But going into the hospital and never coming out doesn’t have to be the solution. Families don’t want that either. The very stressed adult-child caregiver doesn’t really want to send Mom or Dad in for

good. They do need help though. When community services are available—and supported—we'll not need a nursing home as the answer.

There is a trick to making this work that the policy and planning folks will need to wrestle with and that is that the funding will have to be attached to the person and not to institutions. When the money comes into the community people *can* live with independence and dignity and families *can* remain intact and adult children *can* care for their parents without breaking from the stress. We know from years of political and policy change in the mental health system that it's not easy—change is hard—but the human value and the compassionate results that come from that change are worth it. That too is part of building a caring community. The mortar we use to build a caring community is service; Service is gratitude in action.

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If you'd like to have your own experience of this process please consider joining us at Community Caregivers. You can be on the giving end or the receiving end, or both. You could give a ride, get help with some of your chores, make a reassuring call to a senior and have someone help you with things that are harder for you. You can be a volunteer and a client, or you can volunteer now so that this program is strong when you are ready to be a client.

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Here are the dates and locations of next Community Caregivers Orientations to learn about what we do and how to become a volunteer:

Thursday June 11 at 6pm

Tuesday June 23 at 11 am

Sunday July 19 at 1pm

All sessions take place at our offices at 2113 Western Avenue across from the 20  
Mall in Guilderland. \*\*\*\*\*

PS: Golfers we need you too: Call today to sign up for the June 22nd Caregivers  
Golf Tournament at Orchard Creek. What a fun way to be of service! You can reach us at  
456-2898 for more information. Or email to [Diane@communitycaregivers.org](mailto:Diane@communitycaregivers.org)