

Caregivers Corner week of March 24 2009

Now is the Time to Support Community Caregivers

Last week there were several news stories --local and national--about the increasing need for caregivers. The reports described the rapidly increasing need for formal caregiving— aides, assistants and para-professional helpers for our aging population. The need is growing quickly because of the confluence of several factors: more people and more older people.

As a state and as a community we are in the middle of a huge demographic boom and we are seeing what will –in the next few years--be a doubling and then tripling of people over age 60. The increased number of folks in the “senior” or “elder” category will also be living longer. Information from the U.S. Bureau of the Census and the National Center for Health Statistics tells us that those who live to age 65 can expect another 18.7 years. So there are more of us who can expect to live longer and who will want to remain in our homes and outside of institutional care. On top of this we will survive illnesses that people died of five, ten and 20 years ago. Diseases that were once certain killers have now become—thanks to the interventions of science and better healthcare—chronic illnesses and long-term, treatable conditions.

The complicating factor in all of this is that there are fewer formal caregivers (nurses, licensed home healthcare workers) so the demand is increasing as the supply drops.

Why does this matter to you and to us at Community Caregivers? First, we saw it coming. Because we have been helping people to remain independent for more than 15 years —we have seen and have been able to anticipate these changes: Folks being cared for at home who once would certainly have been in hospitals or institutional care; the harder role for family caregivers—two aging spouses caring for each other often with each of them struggling with multiple chronic conditions; adult children pressed to the limit by caring for both older and younger family members at the same time; and now, this year the added burden of changes to the economy.

Two years ago at Community Caregivers we began to change the way we do business by developing workshops and training programs to educate and support family caregivers. Knowing that direct services are limited and that for most families the needs are so great we decided to add caregiver support to our menu of services. We have workshops on caring for the caregiver, writing workshops that teach stress relief and which provide strategies to reduce and manage pain; we also teach caregivers how to use writing to support the person they are caring for and we offer health and disease-specific education and presentations that offer guidance on legal and financial matters all of which affect caregivers and families. This year we began services to families who have a loved one with dementia: support group, education programs and respite for caregivers.

These changes in aging and healthcare intersect with caregiving most dramatically in the workplace. The current economy is impacting tolerance for family caregivers at work.

The adult son or daughter who could come in late or leave early to care for an aging parent or accompany them to a doctor's appointment can't risk that now. The employer who once was able to allow shorter hours or flexing the schedule can't do that. The burden falls to families and when they try to meet their needs with paid caregivers it's a shock. We anticipated these changes as well and began-- more than a year ago --to offer workshops for employers and human resource departments to help them plan for the caregiver needs of their employees.

As a not-for-profit organization, supported primarily by donations and grants, we are acutely aware of these changes and their impact. While many of our services are delivered by volunteers all of our programs are developed and managed by paid staff. We have a stunningly small budget of \$300,000 and a very low administrative ratio, but those financial realities are what allow us to help so many people so capably. Rates for home health aide services range from \$15 to \$25 dollars per hour for the most basic services like a ride or a companion. That was tough even when the economy was good. Now, for all of us, the cost per service is a critical issue.

We need your help. We are asking members of our community—including the people we serve and their families --to be generous with support this year. We are also asking the greater community—those of you who admire our work and who appreciate that what we do makes life better for everyone--We are also asking you to help us. Truly a neighbor's independence—and someday your own—depends on your generosity now.

You can respond to our appeals, send a contribution, ask your groups and teams and faith community to support us and please invite us to come and talk with you about these needs and how you can be part of building a caring community now and for the future.

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