

Show some care – to society’s caregivers

By Christine C. Damon

November is National Family Caregivers Month, a designated time to thank and advocate for those who provide vital home care services for family members, friends and neighbors. Public acknowledgement of these unpaid helpers is definitely deserved and appreciated during this time, but constant caregiving takes its toll twelve months a year. Tangible assistance is what caregivers really need.

If we haven’t already, many of us will be experiencing the emotional, physical and financial effects of caregiving firsthand as baby boomers age out. According to U.S. Census projections, the number of older adults age 60 and older will increase 56% by 2030. Unless a cure is found, a significant number of these aging Boomers will be diagnosed with a dementia-related disease such as Alzheimer’s. State-provided services for dementia patients are already scarce, and the number of unpaid caregivers required to fill the service gap can only increase. However, as the State relies more heavily on informal caregiving, it must also offer a greater level of support to caregivers.

Maria Shriver’s new book, *The Shriver Report: A Woman’s Nation Takes on Alzheimer’s*, states that caregivers’ health care costs are higher due to stress and strain, and that caregiving at home almost always affects work and other responsibilities. These “side effects” are not unique to Alzheimer’s situations, however, and Shriver’s book strongly suggests that the growing number of people called to caretaking duty will have a substantial and negative impact on the workforce and in communities. To lessen the impact, home caregivers need help in four major areas: 1) competence assessment and skills training, 2) enhanced, disease-specific professional support, 3) financial assistance for extra services such as housekeeping, and 4) respite.

Undoubtedly, there will be costs associated with these provisions. However, caregivers who are competent and effective enough to keep their loved ones out of nursing homes will save the local and state governments millions in Medicaid reimbursement. In 2008, for example, the New York State Office for the Aging Caregiver Support Program provided \$14 million in support services to approximately 24,000 caregivers (approximately \$583 per caregiver). During that same time period, Medicaid reimbursements for nursing home care averaged \$244.61 per day. Clearly, each day that an informal caregiver can continue to support a loved one at home is an excellent return on investment.

It’s time to do some reality-based, cooperative planning and education in order to minimize the looming burden of elder care on our society. Informal caregivers need better training, financial assistance, respite, and professional support. As a society, we also need to focus on lifestyles and inventive living situations that make it possible for people to remain more independent. These measures are not a panacea. But they will help us to avoid becoming a nation in which there are too many citizens who need care and insufficient resources to support them. Making sure that home care is provided by healthy, capable caregivers is a first step.