

Perspectives: Calling All Caregivers: The Caregiving Crisis in America

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"I believe that at every level of society -- familial, tribal, national, and international -- the key to a happier and more successful world -- at every level of society -- is the growth of compassion."

The Dalai Lama

Imagine a society where babies are born and left to fend for themselves -- a society in denial of the importance of caring for children, unwilling to make it a priority. It seems unfathomable. Yet, today in our communities the needs of millions of people who need some level of care are ignored or left to untrained and overstressed family members or paid caregivers. As baby boomers hurtle towards retirement, old age, and ultimately death, our society is turning a blind eye to the lack of trained professional and family caregivers for older adults. We must learn to value caregivers of adults -- just as we value the nurturing and caring of children.

The "Caregiving Crisis"

Cultures throughout history and worldwide have relied on family and neighborhood caregivers to support both ill and aging community members, long before the formal establishment of hospitals, the credentialing of "medical professionals," or the creation of managed care. Family and community members cared for one another, taking turns providing for one another's needs as circumstances dictated. Today, however, we are approaching what Rosalyn Carter has referred to as a "caregiving crisis." Most family caregivers face the daunting task of juggling full-time work and caregiving responsibilities, and almost half live more than 100 miles from the person for whom they are providing care. There simply are not enough professional caregivers to bridge the gaps in care that families, faith communities and neighbors are able to provide. America also faces a shortage of nurses and nursing assistants, further increasing the need for family caregivers. Community service agencies are often currently unable to meet the demand for professional caregiving assistance, and some agencies in the country have frighteningly long waiting lists. As the baby boomers continue to age, this trend will become more common in our communities.

Consequences: the faces of caregiving

The caregiving crisis impacts every segment of the community, including family caregivers, care recipients, medical professionals, local businesses, and faith communities. Family caregivers struggle to "do it all," often balancing hands-on care like bed baths and diaper changes with a full-time job and other family responsibilities. The shortage of trained caregiving professionals often forces family caregivers to give care they feel ill prepared to provide. With training, caregivers can feel more confident about the care they provide and have their experience as a caregiver validated. However, many caregivers are unaware of caregiving training and support opportunities in their communities.

The ramifications of the caregiving crisis extend far beyond the community of caregivers. The impact of the caregiving crisis on health care professionals, faith communities, and businesses is significant as well. Hospitals and long-term care facilities scramble to hire and retain qualified staff, often providing care while not fully-staffed. Faith communities witness their members' struggles with caregiving, at times feeling at a loss regarding how to help. Businesses can see a loss in productivity when employees struggle to balance work and caregiving responsibilities.

Solutions

How can communities respond to this caregiving crisis of epic proportions? John F. Kennedy said that "when written in Chinese, the word "crisis" is composed of two characters. One represents danger and the other represents opportunity." The caregiving crisis provides communities with an opportunity to reach out in organized ways to provide for the caregiving needs of its aged and infirm.

One way a community can help its caregivers is through a neighbor-to-neighbor (N2N) support program. Examples of communities in which a neighbor-to-neighbor support program could be of benefit include neighborhood communities, workplace communities, faith communities, civic associations, clubs, or any other group interested in supporting its caregivers. Services of N2N programs might include: telephone support and calls to monitor needs, grocery shopping, transportation, respite, cleaning/laundry assistance, companionship, meal preparation, childcare, and pet care. (For information about how to start a neighbor-to-neighbor program in your community, contact The **Rallying Points Resource Center** at The Hospice of the Florida Suncoast at 866-523-2413).

Comprehensive caregiver training is another way in which communities can respond to the caregiving crisis. *Caregiving at Life's End* is an example of one such initiative to alleviate the caregiving crisis by empowering caregivers through community-based trainings. Based on a national needs assessment of hospice caregivers, the *Caregiving at Life's End* train-the-trainer

program teaches community trainers how to help caregivers find meaning in the caregiving experience and learn how to find support and nurturing to sustain them.

Free train-the-trainers sessions are being offered through The Hospice of the Florida Suncoast for hospice, palliative care, and community agency professionals committed to training family caregivers in their communities. The training includes a caregiver training curriculum, toolkit, and the tools and skills to implement a successful caregiver training in a variety of settings.

Participants will learn how to work with caregivers in local faith, geographic, workplace, and other naturally occurring communities to identify and support caregivers.

(Visit <http://www.thehospice.org/inst.htm> for more information about the *Caregiving at Life's End* training program.)

Supporting caregivers requires a long-term strategy to tackle the multifaceted issues contributing to the crisis. In communities across the country coalitions are working to improve care for those at the end of life and caregiving is a top priority for many of these groups of concerned citizens.

To learn how you can join or start a coalition in your community, visit the **Rallying Points** Web site (<http://www.rallyingpoints.org>). Don't wait for someone else to fix the caregiving crisis. The next caregiver in crisis in America could be you.

The opinions stated in this article are the opinions of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the people and organizations who support and publish The Forum for Family and Consumer Issues.

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