



White Paper Series

Caring for Our Elders: The Basics **Lydia Manning, MGS**

Family caregiving is the bedrock upon which this country's healthcare system stands. The services provided by family caregivers represent 80% of all home care services and are conservatively valued at \$257 billion a year, which is more than twice the amount spent on paid home care and nursing home services combined (FCA, 2001). Family caregivers provide a vast array of emotional, financial, nursing, social, homemaking, and other services on a daily or intermittent basis.

What is Elder Care?

Elder Care describes the issues and care concerns for the frail elders who make up 5% of the over 65 population. This means that of the approximate 45 million seniors currently in the U.S. that make up 16% of the general population, 2.25 million are frail. Frailty is defined as chronic functional impairment in one or more of 6 activities of daily living (ADLs) requiring the help of another person. These ADLs include:

- bathing
- dressing
- grooming
- eating
- transferring
- toileting

While small in percentage, this group utilizes the most healthcare resources overall, including inpatient medical hospitalization, home care, and long-term care in nursing homes and other residential care facilities. It is important to recognize and keep in mind that 80% of the care provided to frail elderly in this country is provided by family members.

An estimated 44 million Americans provide care for adult family members and friends. One in four U.S. households is involved in caring for a loved one 50 or older. Over half of these caregivers are women, who provide more than 20 hours of care a week to a relative. The average length of caregiving is just over 4 years and many caregivers fulfill multiple roles during this time. Most caregivers (62%) are married or living with a partner and nearly three-quarters have worked and provided caregiving responsibilities at the same time. It is estimated that 60% of caregivers are employed and over half of these employed caregivers have had to make adjustments to their work life, such as arriving to work late or leaving early, or even giving up paid employment entirely (FCA, 2001; MetLife, 1999).

Caregivers who resign from the workplace to provide care stand to lose \$659,000 over their lifetime, and organizations can lose up to \$29 billion in productivity (MetLife, 1997). Contrary to popular belief, most people who need long-term care depend on family and friends, not on paid service providers or institutions. 78% of adults in the US who receive long-term care at home get all of their care exclusively from unpaid family and friends. The most common tasks caregivers provide are transportation, grocery shopping, housework, managing finances, and preparing meals, but this is just the tip of the iceberg.

In recent years, changes in our health care delivery system have transferred cost and responsibility for on-going care onto families. As more and more long-term care is provided through home and community-based service programs rather than institutions,

reliance on family and informal caregivers grows. Healthcare worker shortages, a highly fragmented and confusing array of programs, and soaring health and long-term care costs all limit families' access to helpful formal services such as in-home care or adult day services. We can expect the psychological, physical, and other costs of caregiving to rise as everyday care continues to shift to families.

The dramatic increase in the size of the older adult population as the baby boom generation ages can only lead to more people fulfilling caregiving roles. Strengthening family caregiving will continue to be a central issue in our aging society. Caregivers often sacrifice leisure time, and suffer from stress-related illnesses. As society is beginning to recognize the significance of caregiving roles and the challenges that accompany them, it is becoming increasingly important to provide resources and solutions that are effective in helping the informal caregiver

What services are available to elders?

Elder Care can be thought of as an umbrella of care and services for frail elders. These include a broad range of services including:

- Meals (in-home or in congregate settings)
- Socialization
- Personal care
- Light housekeeping in the home
- Residential facilities (retirement homes, Board and Care facilities, and nursing facilities)
- Adult day care
- Transportation
- Telephone reassurance
- Friendly visiting
- Caregiver support
- Respite care
- Emergency response systems such as Lifeline

Navigating the complex and often convoluted and disconnected maze of community-based services can be a daunting challenge. It can be difficult to determine what kinds of help or services could prove most useful and appropriate to a particular situation. Choosing between home care, senior center-based services, or placement in an assisted living facility can be a confusing and frustrating task. As more and more Americans face these difficult decisions, it is important to know that there exists a set of well-trained, well-versed professionals in the aging services community who can help consumers through the care option and access processes.

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