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Date: November 21, 2005

Family Caregivers Provide Invaluable Service

Besides being a reminder that winter is just around the corner, the arrival of the month of November causes us to reflect on our lives and to be thankful for our many blessings. It is also a time to consider the unsung heroes we all know, those who devote themselves to caring for an ill or disabled person in their lives. November has been designated National Family Caregivers Month to highlight the contributions of so many anonymous caregivers, to “advocate for stronger public policy to address family caregiving issues,” and “to raise awareness about community programs that support family caregivers.” The National Family Caregivers Association notes that this month is a time to “thank, support, educate, and celebrate more than 50 million family caregivers across the country.”

Unlike professional caregivers, whose provide this vital service for payment, family caregivers assist someone “**they care about** who is chronically ill or disabled and cannot care for him/herself.” They usually receive no money for their efforts. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration on Aging (AoA) reports that family caregivers supply nearly \$257 billion of services each year caring for their loved ones. Approximately ¼ of all households in the U.S. (22 million households) provide care to a friend or relative over the age of 50. While they are doing that, many (40%) are also raising their own families, and 64% work full or part time. The AoA has found that the average caregiver donates about 12 hours each week caring for another, and that this effort lasts an average of 4 ½ years.

Traditionally, most family caregivers have been female. One study determined that “most women will spend 17 years caring for children and 18 years helping an elderly parent.” (Professional Women’s Foundation) Many times, family caregivers must trade their full-time employment positions for part-time ones, or decline a promotion or further training opportunities, in order to take care of their loved ones. The National Center on Women and Aging found that on average, caregivers lose more than \$659,000 over their lifetimes due to reduced salary and retirement benefits. It is no wonder that caregiving families generally have lower incomes than non-caregiving families. (National Family Caregivers Association)

Although women average 11.5 years “out of the paid labor force, primarily because of caregiving responsibilities,” men average 1.3 years, according to the Business and Professional Women’s Foundation. However, caring for a loved one initially is likely to affect both men and women nearly equally. The National Family Caregivers Association has found that men now comprise about 44% of the caregiving population. Between men and women, family caregivers provide about 80% of homecare services in the United States, according to the U.S. Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality.

In addition to the financial ramifications, providing such essential service to loved ones often leads to poorer health for the caregivers. A study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association found that senior citizens who care for a spouse often have their own health problems, and the additional stress of caring for another contributes to a 63% higher mortality rate” when compared to their non-caregiving peers. The American Journal of Public Health reports that when 36 hours of care or more are provided weekly, rates of depression or anxiety increases by 6 times for those caring for a spouse, and is double the rate for those caring for a parent. According to the National Family Caregivers Association,

family caregivers can have as high as a 51% incidence of insomnia and a 41% incidence of back pain.

Yet, while the physical and emotional demands placed on caregivers increase their risk for several health problems, studies have shown that family caregivers are less likely to take care of themselves than their non-caregiving peers. The AoA provides a list of “Caregiver Survival Tips” to help make the caregiving tasks more manageable. They are

1. Plan ahead
2. Take one day at a time.
3. Accept help.
4. Get enough rest and eat properly.
5. Learn about available resources.
6. Develop contingency plans.
7. Make YOUR health a priority. (Get a yearly checkup and get immunized for flu, pneumonia, and tetanus.)
8. Make time for leisure. (Allow time each day to read, exercise, or spend time talking with friends.)
9. Share your feelings with others.
10. Be good to yourself.

To obtain further information about resources for caregivers, contact the Administration on Aging’s Eldercare Locator (1-800-677-1116) or go to the AoA’s website at either www.aoa.gov/carenetwork or www.eldercare.gov. The National Family Caregivers Association can be contacted at 1-800-896-3650, or www.familycaregiver.org. Additional information about this or other public health concerns is available at the Central Connecticut Health District at 860-721-2822 or www.ccthd.org.