

Support group reaching new category of caregivers

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"I'm just helping my mom out." thought Claire Leininger, taken aback by an invitation to Barrington Area Council on Aging's Caregiver Support Group. Leininger didn't want to appear ungrateful, but she hardly considered herself a caregiver. After all, Leininger lived here, while her mother lived in her own home, in Florida. Although her mother lived independently, her health was beginning to suffer. Leininger was becoming frustrated with the difficulties of working with medical professionals from several states away, and contacted BACOA for suggestions. She never imagined that she was a candidate for such a support group.

Linger politely accepted BACOA's invitation and attended a Caregiver Support meeting. By the end of the evening, she had discovered a haven she hadn't realized she needed. For the first time, she was able to share her concerns with people who knew exactly what she was experiencing. Since that initial session one year ago, Leininger has been a regular at the meetings, recharged by the positive energy generated among kindred spirits. The dynamics of her situation has changed since then, but the support remains constant.

Leininger is not alone in her surprise at being labeled a caregiver. According to a recent survey from the National Family Caregivers Association, 26.6 percent of America's adult population acted as a caregiver during the past year. Many, however, do not realize that they are indeed caregivers. The term itself invokes the image of a live-in nurse, someone who physically cares for an elderly patient. However, a caregiver is anyone who is involved in arranging and/or providing physical or emotional care for an elderly, disabled or chronically ill family member or friend. Leininger represents an increasing trend among adults who are faced with the challenge of coordinating care from afar.

Recognizing this growing community need, BACOA selected "Long Distance Caregiving", a presentation by Cindy Parker, RNC with Great Care Inc., as the subject of this month's Caregiver Support Meeting. The event takes place from 7 to 9 p.m. Wednesday, Aug. 1, in the Community Room of the Barrington Village Hall. Anyone caring for a relative or spouse, or those interested in caregiving issues are encouraged to attend.

BACOA's Support Group began meeting in April 2000, and is facilitated by Bonnie Scherkenbach, BACOA Social Services. Meetings are held the first Wednesday of every month, and feature a specific educational topic each month. Past presentations have included nutrition, Alzheimer's disease, and taking care of the caregiver. Meetings begin with participants introducing themselves and briefly outlining their care giving circumstances. This allows the featured speaker to tailor his or her talk to the audience's needs. Following the presentation, the group talks about the topic and related issues. Discussion soon transitions into the support aspect of the program, where attendees exchange experiences, ideas and concerns. Laughter is also shared, and is a vital

component of the group. Scherkenbach explains that, "A sense of humor is essential to keeping your sanity!"

Leininger agrees, stating "The focus of this group is definitely positive and proactive, very supportive."

In addition to the support group, BACOA has many avenues of assistance for coordinating care, whether local or across country. The first step is to contact the office for information. After listening to your situation, a staff member will research resources and agencies in the care recipient's area, and will provide contact names and telephone numbers. Informative pamphlets, newsletters and lists of recommended books and Web sites are available on a tremendous range of subjects, addressing all aspects of the aging process. The next step is to assess the situation, to identify the needs of the caregiver and care recipient, and explore sources of social and emotional support. A geriatric care manager is an emerging specialty in the healthcare field, and acts as a liaison between caregiver, doctors and patient. This is a particularly beneficial option to those in a long-distance care arrangement, and BACOA is able to provide listings of care managers in the care recipient's vicinity.

The subject of providing care is a very sensitive one, and requires delicate, but persistent, dialogues between family members. Scherkenbach encourages people to plan ahead, to become familiar with available services and support structures long before they're needed. She cautions that medical situations can develop quickly, and decision-making becomes complicated by emotional strain. Scherkenbach is pleased to have welcomed attendees to support group meetings who are not yet in a caregiver role, but are learning what future responsibilities may entail. As an additional planning outlet, BACOA is considering offering a six-week caregiver education course entitled "Taking Care of You: Powerful Tools for Caregiving."

Leininger is an ardent promoter of advanced preparation, and credits BACOA and the Caregiver Support Group with helping her manage the demands of a very difficult situation. With BACOA's assistance, Leininger's mother has recently transitioned to a local care center, to the delight of the family.

The BACOA office is located in the Barrington Village Hall, at 200 South Hough Street, in Suite 001. They may be contacted at (847) 381-5030, or through their Web site at www.bacoa.org.

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