Caregiving in America

Caregiving is a major issue. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), 21 percent of households have a member who needs caregiving. The reasons a person may need care vary: Many are elderly, disabled or ill and need assistance with day-to-day living tasks. They may also need help managing medical conditions.

Contrary to what many people think, most people who provide such care are not paid professionals. They are instead unpaid caregivers, often family members or neighbors, and there are 65.7 million of them in the U.S., according to a report by The National Alliance for Caregiving and the AARP.

The impact of the work done by caregivers is enormous. Analysts note that the economic value of their labor is over $450 billion dollars per year, though it is impossible to put a price tag on the social and personal value of their work. Many care receivers are able to maintain their independence and remain part of their communities because of caregiving.

In recent years, more attention has been paid to the work of caregiving and its effects on caregivers. While many family members experience deep fulfillment in helping to care for their loved ones, caregiving has its own risks:

- Caregivers often experience stress as they try to balance their own needs with the needs of those they care for.
- Some caregivers report that their health has declined as a result of caregiving. They feel that their own health issues negatively impact their ability to provide care.
- The financial cost of caregiving can be serious. Many caregivers report spending thousands of dollars each year in support of their caregiving work. In addition, some caregivers find it necessary to quit their jobs or cut their hours so that they can be present for the family member who they care for.

Caregiving is important work, one worthy of support from family, friends, neighbors and faith communities.

Dear God, we thank you for your loving care and the opportunity to care for each other. Help us to remember and care for the caregivers in our midst.

Amen.

Caring for the caregiver within faith communities

Almost 30 percent of adults in the United States are caregivers. This means that your congregation likely has several caretakers in its membership. While faith communities are often very concerned with providing care to the ill, elderly and disabled, family caregivers can be overlooked.

The work of a caregiver can be overwhelming, and some givers of care can be reluctant to ask for help or support. When a caregiver becomes overwhelmed and does not get help, his or her life is negatively impacted, and he or she may not be able to continue to provide good care to the care receiver.

Because caregiving typically takes place in homes, caregivers and the challenges they face can be invisible to others. Sometimes congregations aren't aware of a caregiver’s situation until it becomes incredibly difficult and much harder to address. Awareness of caregivers within your faith community is an important part of providing quality care to all members.

Congregations can do a lot to support caregivers. Here are some ideas:

- Identify caregivers. Clergy and laypeople who provide care to the disabled, shut-ins or the elderly should find out who is providing care. The caregiver may also be in need of pastoral care and support.
- Provide practical assistance. Members of the congregation can volunteer to provide practical assistance, such as help with chores. When appropriate, community members may be able to provide respite care.
- Acknowledge the work of caregivers in worship services and community prayers.
- Provide direction to caregivers who are in need of professional help. Direction may include directing them to casework services, counseling or other resources.
- Reach out to caregivers. They may feel isolated from their peers. Plan time to spend together over coffee or a meal. In a recent study by AARP, 51% of caregivers indicated that they pray as a way of coping with caregiving stress. When appropriate, offer to pray with caregivers.
- Help the caregiver find out if they qualify for financial assistance programs. The National Council on Aging’s Benefits CheckUp site helps people learn about available assistance: www.benefitscheckup.org.

Resources:
- Advocate Health Care: advocatehealth.com
- Family Caregiver Alliance: caregiver.org
- VA Caregiver Support: caregiver.va.gov
- Caregiver Action Network: caregiveraction.org

Advocate Health Care
Inspiring medicine. Changing lives.

3-16