

## Tips for dealing with caregiver shortage

*By Ellen Waldman*

*August 25, 2020*

This is a column about shortages. In particular, a gap in the numbers of locally available caregivers to meet the needs of people requiring their services.

I don't have exact figures, but I have a couple of anecdotes to share from recent experiences. There's also the apparent shortage of people who can be named in your advance directive and other important documents. Solutions are not perfect, but these scenarios can both be addressed.

A client needed 16 hours per day of caregiving in his home. He was receiving hospice service (which does not provide caregivers), and they felt that having caregivers were important for his safety. Some of the hours were covered by a privately hired caregiver, but the rest needed to be filled by a caregiving agency. It took calls to five different agencies to find two of them who together could manage to cover the remainder of the hours. None had enough staff to handle this on their own.

In asking around, I've heard several explanations for this shortage. In the midst of COVID-19, many more people are staying home who might normally have moved to an assisted-living community. To remain at home safely and have their needs met, they've hired caregivers. I've also heard that some caregivers just don't want to risk going into homes, and possibly exposing their own children to the virus. In addition, there are more facilities being opened that are also hiring caregivers.

What can you do to meet the need for caregivers in your home, if they're harder to find? Since client needs fluctuate all the time, you might start by calling several of the caregiving agencies in Medford. In past columns, I advised asking whether they actually employ their staff as a way to differentiate an agency from a registry. Registries only provide someone who is licensed or certified to legally work in the state. They have no legal supervision responsibilities. The workers themselves may not be covered under any liability insurance or have workers' compensation coverage. Stick with licensed and bonded agencies such as Right at Home (541-414-0800), Visiting Angels (541-773-5002), and Interim Homecare (541-779-0054).

You can also contact any of the aging life care managers ([aginglifecare.org](http://aginglifecare.org)) listed in our ZIP code. They may have some information to help you find care in your home. Be very cautious about hiring a friend-of-a-friend, or someone without any backup. What happens if they can't show up for their shift? You will want to do background checks on them, which is another reason why it's much safer to hire through agencies, in many cases.

Here's the other shortage that seems to be showing up. People are getting their documents in place, which is a good thing. The advance directive for health care asks you to choose a health care representative who will advocate for your needs if you're not able to speak for yourself. The problem seems to be that many people don't know anyone to appoint and are looking for an answer. There are a limited number of professionals who are able to take on this role. It would be unethical for anyone to carry a case load of 50 people, for instance.

Solutions to this are not simple either. Keep in mind that you can fill out an advance directive, stating your wishes, even if you don't have anyone to appoint as your representative. Then, consider who else might be in a similar position and see if you can be the representative for each other. Developing friendship networks and communities to support you as you age is vital for a host of reasons. Use this time to reach out to others in the same situation and start there. At a minimum, you might be able to share the role on medical forms such as "emergency contact" or "release information to" with another person.

I'll end with a story about an older man who really needed to get some help. Instead, while blind in one eye, and hardly able to see out of the other, he felt he could still drive himself around to familiar places. He had decided not to ask for any help. He was also realizing it was past the time to put together an estate plan and advance directive, and had no one to appoint for any important positions. A simple reminder is this could be an outcome for anyone. If you're doing well right now, consider the appropriate options and plan ahead. Please don't wait until you feel the shortage and can't find the solution.