

Sharing ideas about giving caregivers a break

By Ellen Waldman

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"Everyone needs a good listening to" is a quote I completely agree with. Especially when it comes to those who feel unheard, unseen, or in any way not having their needs validated. This description often applies to those we call family caregivers. In this context, a family caregiver means anyone who provides assistance with normal daily life activities, such as transportation, preparing meals, running errands or more intensive personal care, such as dressing and bathing. These experiences are often both rewarding and exhausting.

AARP is sponsoring "Community Conversations about Caregiver Respite" from 4 to 6 p.m. Wednesday, June 15, at the Medford Library large room, 205 S. Central Ave. According to their flyer: "AARP is seeking public input from community members, especially family caregivers, to help craft ideas and improve access to and effective usage of, caregiver respite in Oregon." In fact, these meetings are going to occur at 11 sites around the whole state. Here is the direct link for more information and to register for free: aarp.cvent.com/RespiteMedford061516, or call 877-926-8300.

The organizers are looking for your thoughts, ideas, questions, and concerns about caregiver respite. Simply put, respite is the need for a time-out, a short break, from the seemingly never-ending demands this care requires. This conversation is not a minute too soon. I believe we need to create a variety of viable, easy-to-access options, so that our loved ones, and those providing the care for them, all receive what they need to remain as healthy as possible. The clearer we can be about what it is that families are actually looking for, the better chance we have to fill that need. Do people need more time off daily, occasionally overnight, or for longer stretches? Are they looking for a wider range and more affordable choices for respite?

In addition to families, there are two other groups that are also invited to have a voice in this conversation. One are the businesses that are providing these services to families, such as caregiving agencies and foster care homes. The other important group are the employers, whose businesses will be impacted by their employee's need to meet these caregiving demands. In this regard, there are few areas of community life which will NOT be impacted by this caregiving crisis.

Here is an example of a challenging scenario and how it was solved in another state. Jane could not get any real sleep at night, as Bill, her husband who had dementia, was up and active at that time. She tried different ways to get him to stay in his own room and not disturb her, but it didn't seem to work. She was wearing out from this, and wanted more than anything to get a full night's sleep. In the location where they lived, they actually had a van service to transport folks who like to be up at night, to a facility where they can do activities, eat or socialize with others, and even nap if they wish. Their family caregiver then gets some real restorative sleep so they can be functional the next day, whether at work, or at home with their loved one. We do not yet have any resources here for placing people in overnight respite to meet this need.

As a loving husband, Jim was sure he could provide for his lovely wife, Carol, on his own, in their Ashland home. He was doing a great job of it and enjoyed every day they were together. But he, too, felt the need for some respite, and decided to plan a trip for a week. When he realized the amount of overseeing, pre-planning, and coordination it would take, not to mention the costs associated with this, he gave up on the idea. The downside was that although he choose to skip this much-needed break, he ended up needing a surgical procedure which took him out of the home anyway. And he still had to find all those supports to keep Carol safely at home, or try to find another secure facility where he could place her. Whether by choice or medical necessity, these situations will arise, and we are acknowledging that it's better to have some answers sooner than later.

Your voice needs to be heard, and this is a wonderful way to participate in the conversation. If you're a family member, a service provider, an employer who could be impacted, or are in a position to change policies, please get involved. We can listen to one another — and from listening, who knows all the creative outcomes that could result?