

December 12, 2006

Assisting aging clients with caregiving issues

By Shari VanderGast, LCSW, JD, Executive Director of Intervention Associates

Often, trust managers and attorneys are called on to provide services beyond their expertise to help their aging clients with caregiving issues ranging from home maintenance to personal hygiene. These issues were previously handled by family members and relatives but changing family demographics have removed elderly clients' safety nets. Trends such as having children later in life, women in the workforce, people living longer and adult children not living in the same area as their parents, have resulted in non-family members first noticing caregiving problems that arise.

A closer look

Today, more and more adults between the ages of 30 and 60 years are faced with competing demands for their time, energy and resources. They are forced to balance the needs of raising their own children, meeting the demands of their careers and caring for aging parents. This "sandwich generation" continues to grow with adult-child caregivers playing an increasing role in the care of their aging parents. At the same time, obstacles to fulfilling that role continue to grow.

Consider the following caregiving facts:

- Over 22 million families in the U.S. have at least one person who is a caregiver for an older family member.
- Family caregivers provide more than 80% of all long-term care.
- Approximately 73% of caregivers are women; the average age of a caregiver is 46 years.
- Approximately 64% of family caregivers are also employed outside of the home.
- Almost 50% of all caregivers spend at least 8 hours each week providing care relating to activities of daily living such as dressing, bathing, managing a household or dealing with finances. For caregivers who live out of town, they spend several hours each week on the phone as well as frequent travel trying to monitor the aging parent's welfare and coordinate care as best they can.

Already stressed with raising children and meeting the demands of their jobs, many adult children are not prepared to take care of their parents. They are inexperienced in dealing with the emotional and physical factors of aging, as well as legal and financial issues that arise. In addition, they provide care in isolation without getting needed support from the experts. Many adult children caregivers say they feel guilty because they can't meet all that is demanded of them and have increased levels of anxiety and depression.

Identify potential problems early

To eliminate some of the stress and prevent small problems from developing into crisis situations, it is essential that the aging individual's situation be evaluated early on. This can be quite a challenge because most individuals are reluctant to accept help or don't see the need for it. When trust managers and attorneys encounter issues around caregiving, they can help clients and their families by working with a professional care management organization that serves as a liaison between family members, doctors, trust managers, attorneys and/or anyone else involved in the individual's care. Care management organizations provide an objective assessment of the individual's situation as well as creative care management strategies to best meet the individual's needs.

What to expect from a care management organization

While each care management organization may have its own approach to providing care solutions for its clients, there are certain services and standards that should be adhered to on a consistent basis to ensure that the individual receives the most effective and efficient care. These are described below.

1. Care managers should have advanced degrees in gerontology, social work or nursing.
2. The care management organization should have extensive knowledge about the costs, quality and availability of health care and long-term care services in the area it serves
3. A care management organization staff member should be available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
4. Care planning assessment should be conducted by an experienced care manager to identify problems, eligibility for assistance or need for services.
5. Screening, arranging and monitoring of in-home help or other services should be provided on an ongoing basis.
6. The care manager should serve as a liaison to families at a distance, as well as to physicians, trust officers, financial planners and attorneys – assessing the individual on a regular basis and alerting families to problems.

In addition, the care management organization should have experience in reviewing medical issues and offering referrals to specialists to avoid future problems and conserve assets. And, it should provide assistance in moving to or from a retirement complex, care home or nursing home; ongoing counseling and support and crisis intervention, when needed.

As trust managers and attorneys continue to discover caregiver issues and fulfill the safety net roles formerly held by family members, they have an opportunity to make a significant difference in their clients' lives as long as they know where to turn when dealing with sensitive caregiving issues.

Shari VanderGast, LCSW, JD is Executive Director of Intervention Associates, a Quaker-affiliated not-for profit care management and home care agency located/serving the Delaware Valley. Shari can be reached at 610-254-9001 or at svandergast@interventionassociates.org.

###