

This article is the third in our new series, "Profiles in Caregiving," presenting interviews with Caregiver Coordinators from Area Agencies on Aging across the state. We'd like to extend our sincere thanks to Melodie Paladino, Director of the Caregiver Resource Center for the Chautauqua County Office for the Aging, for agreeing to be our subject.

Interview with Melodie Paladino, Chautauqua County

What is the most important service we can provide:

Our Volunteer Respite and our support groups have been invaluable tools for helping caregivers. Our volunteer respite program consists of 30-32 volunteers from the community who go into the caregiver's home and stay with the care recipient so that the caregiver can go to doctor's appointments, shopping or any other short term activity. We can provide the volunteer respite on an as-needed basis or we can schedule it as a recurring appointment, depending on the needs of the caregiver and the schedule of the volunteer. We also offer services such as telephone reassurance, friendly visiting and shopping help for the caregiver, if they should choose to stay home while someone else runs errands for them.

We don't get too many calls for overnight respite, but we do have agreements in place with two nursing homes to provide this service. Typically, a caregiver requesting this service would need from several days up to a week. Our accounting department has been very flexible in working with us to ensure that these requests are honored.

If I had more funding, I would put it into:

We hold a Caregiver's Tea and Relaxation Day, to enable caregivers to take some time out for themselves. Our last outing was held at Camp Onyahsa on Chautauqua Lake and was a two hour event. We made a brief presentation at the beginning, outlining the services offered by our Caregiver Support Center, and we had an information table available at all times, but we also provided services such as a hairdresser, May Kay demonstrations, aromatherapy, exercise instruction, and massage. I think that it's very important that caregivers are able to recharge their own batteries, that way they are better capable of caring for others.

I'd really like to do more with this program, and going forward, I plan to offer it twice a year. It's hard to get caregivers to take time out for themselves, and yet, it's so important to their own well-being.

How do you sustain support groups?

We have two support groups, one located in the north of the county and one located in the south of the county. The one in the south is very successful, generally drawing anywhere from 6 to 14 attendees. The group in the north doesn't draw quite as many attendees. I think that the personalities involved in the northern group create an unusual dynamic, but this may change over time. The support groups are run (and facilitated) by Family Services, a not for profit group.

What kind of community outreach do you do?

We distribute a Caregiver Assistance newsletter to about 360 individuals in the county. This is published through “The Comforts of Home” and we add a local news page. This is where we publicize all of our caregiver events, including support groups.

[For more information on “The Comforts of Home” publication, please visit our web site at www.nysaaaa/caregiver for a link to this offering.]

Do you utilize the local media?

We do announcements over the radio and in the local newspapers. We also support 50 information centers throughout the county. These information centers are located in libraries, doctors’ offices, public buildings, etc. They contain information in the form of a senior services brochure, our Office for the Aging brochure, support group information and caregiver information.

In the past, we have partnered with local newspapers for National Family Caregivers Month. We posted an announcement in the local paper inviting the community to submit names of caregivers for recognition and we drew names out of a hat and presented the chosen individuals with rewards—gift baskets donated by local merchants. Many caregivers were surprised to be nominated. They don’t consider what they do to be “caregiving,” they’re just doing what a good wife/daughter/husband/son does for an elderly relative.

Do you maintain a lending library?

We maintain a special section at the local libraries. In fact, we donated all of our Caregiver material to the libraries to have them set aside a special section for caregivers.

Are there partnerships you’d like to highlight?

We work with a lot of different agencies. Our county supports a CASA program and we get a lot of referrals from them. In addition we have great referral relationships with Chautauqua Opportunities, Catholic Charities, the Alzheimer’s Association, the Association for the Blind. CASA provides Respite Aide service and Waters of Westfield and the Chautauqua County Nursing Home provide overnight respite. These agencies also exhibit at our Senior Expos.

How did you come to this position?

I was a CNA but hurt my back. When this position opened up in the county, I knew that it would be great for me as I really enjoyed working with seniors.

What would you like to work on?

I’d like to develop a stronger support group in the north, and I’d like to really expand our Tea and Relaxation Day to include more Caregivers.

Also our grandparents Raising Grandchildren program has not been fully utilized since the grandparents are typically too young to qualify for Office of the Aging service. We do collaborate with DSS on some of these cases.

Where do you feel your program is strongest?

I think that we succeed when we get caregivers to realize that it's important for them to take time out for themselves.

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