This article is the first 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 Cynthia Stevenson, Director of the Caregiver Resource Center for the Onondaga County Department for Aging and Youth, for agreeing to be our first subject.

Interview with Cynthia Stevenson, Onondaga County

What is the most important service we can provide? Make available a person to talk to. By the time a caregiver calls us, they're at the end of their rope. Most callers need some help understanding the full extent of their situation as well as referrals to community resources. We return all calls within 24 hours.

If I had more funding, I would put it into: Respite services. Currently, we have three contracts for day programs, one is dementia–specific, two are short term respite programs.

We contract with the Alzheimer's Association of Central New York to provide a dementia specific day program and with the Salvation Army and St. Francis Adult Day Program to provide day care services to the generic population age 60 and older who need socialization and/or supervision. All of these programs are social models and operate 5 days a week from 7:30 am to 5 pm. Two of them provide transportation for an additional fee.

For our short term respite, we contract with Home Aides of CNY for a program offering care provided by a home aide or aides in the home or, if appropriate, in a skilled care nursing home with whom Home Aides has a contract. There are several options for care including one day a week for 4 hours, two days a week for 2 hours each, a weekend, a week, or longer in the case of medical emergency such as surgery for the primary caregiver. An individual caregiver is entitled to a maximum of 6 weeks of service in a given year. When possible, we coordinate with EISEP to maximize in-home services and utilize the same staff to maintain continuity of care.

We also fund a respite program for grandparents caring for grandchildren, which is not as well utilized. We contract with Independent Health Care Services, Inc. to offer the Kincare Respite Program. Home aides with training in nanny services provide child care to children under 18 years of age to enable grandparents or older relatives caring for grandchildren or young family members in their home to have time away from their caregiving responsibilities. This service can be provided for a day and evening, a weekend or a week in the children's residence so that routine activities can be maintained.

How do you sustain support groups? We prefer to call them "Discussion Groups," We offer time limited meetings held bi-monthly or monthly for 6 or 8 sessions in community spaces made available by churches, libraries, retirement or assisted living residences. Each group of 8 to10 caregivers, usually spouses/partners or parents, is facilitated by a human services professional who volunteers his/her time. The participants share their common experiences, help individuals with problem solving, explore the emotional aspects of caregiving, offer support, decide on specific topics and invite experts in for presentations as needed. An aging services specialist is present to provide information on

community programs and services. The goal of the meetings is to provide information and support to family caregivers. We're looking to start "Discussion Groups" at major bookstores. Today's caregiver doesn't want to hang out in a church basement.

We have also set up a telephone support group, and we were fortunate to be able to use our county conference call system to keep costs low. Participants simply call in to us and we hook them together as well as facilitate the session.

In addition, we have our own version of "Men Making Meals," modeled after the program developed by the Broome County Office for the Aging. It isn't technically a support group, but that has become a wonderful by-product of the class.

What kind of community outreach do you do? I typically provide two community presentations per month and I have focused primarily on caregivers in the workplace. I work with the EAP directors of some of the larger county employers. On average, I present an 8 week program at lunch time, usually four sessions in the Fall, and four more in the Spring.

I also make presentations to community groups such as professional organizations, church groups, and our library Lunch & Learn series. I make certain to keep my name visible and accessible to staff of senior centers, senior residences, discharge planners and other professionals in the eldercare network.

Do you utilize the local media? My Commissioner, Marilyn Pinsky, secures local newspapers to publish human interest stories a couple of times a year. Also, for the past several years, I have been a once-a-year panelist on a local PBS Financial planning program, "Financial Fitness," that airs at 8:00 on Thursdays. Every year the host will showcase a program on caregiving, long term care insurance, estate planning, and residential choices. It has been very well received.

I also submit articles to local/suburban newspapers regarding special activities and maintain a listing in selected church/synagogue services bulletins.

Do you maintain a lending library? I don't keep shelves full of books in my office, if that's what you mean! However, we do maintain and distribute caregiver literature, including books, videos and now DVDs, through our county library system. Every year I meet with the city library director and between us we coordinate ordering of materials. It's a nice partnership. We utilize their purchasing power, they catalog, store and circulate the materials throughout the 35 libraries in the system. The library and the OFA each contributes a thousand dollars a year. We publish a bibliography, "Taking Care of Family, Friends & Ourselves," a booklet describing our collection, which we circulate to our partners throughout the community.

Are there other partnerships you'd like to highlight? We have a great Developmental Disabilities Aging coalition through "Exceptional Family Resources," a not-for-profit. The Developmental Disablilties Aging Coalition is a group of professionals in the aging network who work with the developmentally disabled community in some way. Its goals are 1) to inform ourselves about the issues and resources relevant to the developmentally disabled and 2) to inform ourselves about programs and services and

special events or activities that can be used for referral to our respective client populations. The group meets monthly and decides who to invite as speakers to monthly meetings.

We work very closely with the Alzheimer's Association of CNY to present joint programs, make referrals both ways, sponsor special events like our new "Institute for Caregivers". *(For details, see "What's New on the Horizon" section below.)*

We have an Elder Law Unit through our local Legal Aid Society. The Onondaga County Department of Aging and Youth helps fund this unit at the Legal Aid Society of Mid NY. The legal staff serves as 1) consultants to the Caregiver Resource Center staff as I work with individuals and their families, 2) faculty for programs/trainings we present in the community and 3) a mutual referral source. We work with Adult Protective Services as well. We also have a great relationship with Hospice. We refer back and forth all the time.

How did you come to this position?

I ran, and still do, a senior caregiver mediation program entitled "Family Caregiving Planning Program" where I use mediation as a strategy for bringing family together to plan. Although I'm not a NYS Certified mediator, I do about 45 of these sessions per year.

Have you hosted any seminars, conferences or events?

In November of 2005 our "Power Caregiving Day" drew 55 attendees. This event was held to acknowledge family caregivers and to observe National Caregivers Month in November and was jointly sponsored by the Alzheimer's Association of CNY. Dr. Mark Matloff, licensed psychologist, psychotherapist and coach, conducted a morning hands-on workshop designed to help family caregivers of older persons gain emotional strength and personal empowerment.

At noon we broke for a picnic lunch, followed by workshops in the afternoon. Afternoon workshops included: "The Language of Alzheimer's" (coping techniques, communication strategies, dealing with emotions), "Socialization and Activities for Persons with Dementia" and "Community Based Care Options."

The day concluded with a special "taking leave ceremony" created by two family caregivers/social workers.

Anything new on the horizon?

Yes, I'm very excited to be on the planning committee for a community collaboration we're calling the Institute for Caregivers (I-Care).

Groups involved in this undertaking include the Alzheimer's Association, our county Office for the Aging, the Red Cross and area nursing homes. We're bringing more groups on board all the time.

This year, starting in May, we expect to hold one class per month, from 5:30-7:30 pm Next year, we're shooting for once a week. Home Aides of CNY, a nonprofit home health care agency, is providing space for our sessions, and we're in the process of finalizing our agenda. Most of our faculty are professionals and experts in their fields who serve in a pro bono capacity. Topics we plan to address include:

estate planning, communication strategies, depression, dealing with stress, financial

planning, art therapy, housing, insurance, cognitive changes, nutrition, caregivers in the workplace, end of life, ethics, home safety and caregiver empowerment.

We will also offer, "ABCs of Daily Care," a hands-on workshop to train caregivers in the skills necessary to address the activities of daily living in a home setting, to be conducted off site with professional trainers.

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