

This article is the second 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 Deana Prest, Caregiver Support Program Coordinator for the Rensselaer County Unified Family Services, Department for the Aging, for agreeing to be our subject.

Interview with Deana Prest, Rensselaer County

What is the most important service we can provide:

The most important services we can provide include coordination, guidance and access to services. It’s important to build trust, especially in the initial contact. I try to make it clear what I can offer, so that the situation doesn’t deteriorate to the next level—and what else is available if we need to cross that bridge. If people who come to me can trust my advice and guidance, we can keep them in a better place.

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

The need changes from year to year, but right now, respite is the service we need the most. It’s also the most expensive. The balance keeps shifting between the demand for in-home respite and institutional respite. We try to provide the type of respite that best fits the family’s wishes.

Currently we can provide non-medical in-home (companion) respite or we can send a home health aide. The companion respite is very effective. We provide in-home respite up to 40 hours over twelve months. For other situations, we offer a stay at an assisted living residence (we have a contract with Atria), up to seven days in a twelve month period. Sometimes we combine all options. We work with the same services that EISEP provides.

How do you sustain support groups?

We contract with Catholic Charities and Alzheimer’s Association for our support groups. They have been very effective in hosting a series of Caregiver workshops. This tends to remove the stigma of support groups. People equate “support groups” with complaining and hand-wringing about their problems, but Caregiver Workshops puts a more positive constructive spin on it. Under our previous contract with Hospice, they provided workshops addressing topics such as estate planning, giving up the driver’s license and yoga. The most popular workshop, however, proved to be pizza and movie night. As a result of this discovery, we now have a social event included in our new contract. Additionally, we have a contract with the Alzheimer’s Association to provide “Family Discussions.”

What kind of community outreach do you do?

We had an existing database when I took the job, but we also provide information through church bulletins, hospital discharge planners, and county social workers. We have also put flyers in county payroll checks.

When I first took this position, I worked hard at getting the attention of the discharge planners. Now, they all know me and they call me instead of the other way around.

We've had a great relationship with Home Instead, a local home care agency. They have been wonderful about making referrals.

I have also spoken at senior centers, at senior housing complexes and at rehabilitation facilities, but at this point in time it's mostly word of mouth.

Do you utilize the local media?

We have put ads in the local newspaper, and my commissioner, Joe Cybulski has given several interviews, but he tends to speak generally about the Office for the Aging programs.

Our Department publishes its own "Aging Trends" every month. I'm looking to incorporate an new section devoted entirely to our Caregiver Support program.

Do you maintain a lending library?

I've found that the best written resource I can provide to caregivers is the Idiot's Guide to Caring for Aging Parents and Caregiver Magazine published by Caregiver.com. We keep multiple copies of the latest issue and bring a copy when we meet with caregivers.

Are there partnerships you'd like to highlight?

We have a wonderful partnership with Hospice. They have provided our Caregiver Workshops, and also they presented the ABCs of Caregiving. This was an eight hour training presented last fall. Under the new contract, we are asking them to split it into two days. Catholic Charities provides support groups for us as well.

Our county TRIAD is a great resource and we are lucky to have them in our county. TRIAD is the partnership between law enforcement, county Sheriff's office, the District Attorney, local police, senior advocates and senior volunteers to promote a safe environment for seniors. TRIAD has provided GPS bracelets for several families in our community. Originally, they provided probation bracelets, but have subsequently replace those. They also interact with the Samaritan Hospital Crisis Center and make referrals to us where appropriate.

TRIAD has a conference every year, usually in November. This year it was sponsored by Well Care and offered a catered dinner with featured dinner speaker Dr. Jon Polizza. The County Executive always makes a point of attending.

How did you come to this position?

I was hired for this position when Rensselaer County first established a caregiver support function in the Office for Aging. Before that I had worked for the state legislature, but had taken time off to be with my kids.

What I would you like to work on?

There are so many great programs that I haven't had time or resources to explore. I'd love to be able to establish something for Grandparents Raising Grandchildren. If we could somehow provide scholarships to camp, or initiate an outreach through the schools, I feel that we could really meet an underserved need.

Making the Link is another program that I'd really like to initiate in the county.

Also, we have a program that I'd like more Caregiver to take advantage of; We offer the caregiver the opportunity to get a massage or acupuncture treatment once every six months. We thought that this would be a great way for caregivers to handle stress, but they have been reluctant make use of this service.

Where do you feel is your program is strongest?

When you have a strong passion for helping people it shows, and you can really make a difference in their lives. It's important for caregivers to take time out for themselves. I think my message is that it's not only ok, but important to take care of yourself.

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