

Finding Help Through Faith Communities

Paula S. McCarron

Six out of 10 Americans say religion is “very important” to them and believe that faith can solve “all or most of today’s problems,” according to a June 2004 Gallup Poll. A study by John Hopkins University found that 41 percent of family caregivers are willing to accept help from outside sources, but say they would prefer such help come from local community or religious organizations.¹ It’s clear that many Americans place a high degree of trust in their faith beliefs and in the faith community. When family caregivers turn to the faith community for help, however, what kind of assistance do they find?

Let’s start at the local level. While 80 percent of congregations in the United States report that they offer some form of caregiving assistance, most admit they are serving small numbers of people and have a limited range of services to offer, such as visits to hospitalized or homebound members, or volunteer support in providing meals, transportation or child care.² While valuable, these services tend to be sporadic, short-term, and not focused on supporting family caregivers. Too often there is no consistent effort made to find, train, and support volunteers. For these reasons, caregiving families who need long-term care and assistance are often not served.

Take the story of Ellen Mejias, a family caregiver in Land O’ Lakes, Florida, who shared her experiences as part of the NFCA Caregiver Story Project. Mejias wrote, “I sat in a Catholic church office when I was six months pregnant with my fourth child. My other children were at my side. My mother lay at my home recovering from open-heart surgery

and my dad was preparing to go in for his right knee replacement, which would take months of rehab. I begged them for someone to come to my home and help me out. I was told that would be too much of a liability. Thanks to all those frivolous lawsuits that made others rich, no one would dare step in my house to volunteer because they might get sued. I was crying so much and the children were making so much noise that the priest in the next room got up to close his office door.”

Realizing that stories like Ellen’s are not unique, and to better meet the needs of their members and the community, many faith communities are investing time, energy, and resources in creating new caregiving programs on their own or in partnership with others. Many of these services specifically take into account the needs of family caregivers and individuals who are coping with chronic illness, disability, and the effects of aging.

Along with organizations that are faith-specific, there are a number of interfaith groups that provide some form of support for family caregivers. Keep in mind that many faith-specific organizations have programs that are open to everyone. Listed below are some of the services that are available to family caregivers and/or the elderly or disabled living alone. Given the thousands of local services, it is impossible to provide a complete list of what is available. Be sure to contact your local faith community, senior center, United Way agency, and the Area Agency on Aging to learn what other services may be available in your area.

International Parish Nurse Resource Center

Parish nursing, an ecumenical and

international movement, reclaims the historic roots of health and healing found in many religious traditions. While based upon Judeo-Christian traditions, parish nursing is consistent with the basic teaching of all faiths. To date, 7,000 nurses have “graduated” from the parish nurse program.

Parish nurses serve as educators, referral agents, and advocates. They may be involved in home visits, coordinating volunteers, organizing health fairs, facilitating support groups, or helping people find resources. Many serve as volunteers. Others may be employed either by a congregation or medical center.

Parish nurse Elizabeth Johnson, R.N., B.S.N., of St. James Lutheran Church in Rock Island, Illinois, says, “Generally, it’s hard for people to ask for help. But here, people know me. They say it’s more comfortable to come to me than to have to go to a stranger.”

Johnson also coordinates health-related events for the benefit of community members. “We invite all the other groups in the neighborhood. We’ve got several nearby, including a Greek Orthodox church and a Jewish center.”

Shepherd Centers of America

Founded in 1972, Shepherd Centers are dedicated to promoting a new vision of aging that includes meaningful opportunities and independent living for older adults. Located in 20 states and 75 communities, Shepherd Centers offer life-long learning, wellness, and fellowship activities for mid-life and older adults.

Community-based and interfaith, Shepherd Centers are open to all members of the community. In some communities, Shepherd Center volunteers provide handyman services, home visits, and transportation to help older adults continue living in their own homes. Caregiver support groups, educational forums, and adult day services may also be

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offered. Some centers are aligned with Faith in Action programs.

Faith in Action

Faith in Action volunteers of every faith, including Catholics, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, and Protestants, are working together to improve the lives of their neighbors with long-term health needs. Through Faith in Action, volunteers help people remain independent by providing assistance with the tasks of everyday living, such as food shopping, trans-

portation, light housekeeping, and yard work. There are currently more than 1,000 Faith in Action programs in the U.S.

One of the newest programs is Faith in Action, Hart Felt Ministries, located in Jacksonville, Florida. Founder Jane Hart says she recalls a life-changing conversation when her mother once asked her, "Jane Alice, how do you foresee your future?" Hart says she knew then that she wanted to work with the elderly, particularly to help elders remain in their own homes.

Hart served as a congregational volunteer and then as a hospice volunteer. With no knowledge of Faith in Action, she started to develop a non-profit organization that would provide home care assistance to frail elders. Through her research, she discovered her dreams matched the vision of The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which provides start-up grants to new Faith in Action programs.

Now in its first months of operation, Faith in Action, Hart Felt Ministries is already providing services to elders and other adults coping with illness and disability, and their family caregivers. Already a handful of volunteers are active with the program and it is hoped that 25 volunteers will be trained and assigned in the next few months.

When it comes to helping family caregivers and the homebound, Connie Siskowski of Boca Respite of Boca Raton, Florida, says, "We see people who are hungry and we see people who are homeless, but typically we don't see people who are homebound. They're an invisible population, living behind closed doors. We don't often know who they are or who needs our help."

Boca Respite is a network of community agencies, religious organizations, and volunteers working together to help homebound individuals and family caregivers. It, too, was started with a Faith in Action grant. Currently 90 volunteers pro-

vide care and assistance for 250 people in 160 households in Boca Raton.

Siskowski describes a family caregiver who spent his retirement savings caring for his wife. Now living alone and in need of help himself, he doesn't have the money to pay for services, which, unfortunately, is the case with many family caregivers. Luckily for him, help is being provided by Boca Respite volunteers. Siskowski also sees a greater purpose being served: "We're here to help people live independently and with dignity."

Stephen Ministries

Stephen Ministers provide one-to-one supportive and spiritual care to individuals experiencing a life challenge such as illness, hospitalization, or death of a loved one. Service continues for as long as desired by the person being served.

Rev. Kenneth Haugk called upon the members of his congregation for assistance when he realized that people in his church and the community needed more care than he alone could provide. Rev. Haugk created the first team of Stephen Ministers in 1975. Since that time, more than 450,000 lay volunteers have participated in Stephen Ministry training, which involves 50 hours of initial training. Stephen Ministers can be found in 9,000 congregations and represent 100 Christian denominations. Generally, support is offered in face-to-face visits and phone calls.

Association of Jewish Family and Children's Agencies

Tracing their roots back to the 19th century, Jewish Family and Children's Agencies began by assisting Jewish refugees and immigrants, orphans, the poor and needy. Today, Jewish Family and Children's Agencies provide health and social services to people of all ages and faiths.

Located in 30 states, these agencies offer many services of benefit to

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FINDING HELP

The Association of Jewish Family and Children's Agencies

800/634-7346 (toll-free)

www.ajfca.org

Catholic Charities

Contact a neighborhood Catholic church or the Diocese in your area, or: 703/549-1390
www.catholiccharitiesinfo.org

Faith in Action

877/324-8411 (toll-free)

www.fiavolunteers.org

International Parish Nurse Resource Center

314/918-2559

www.ipnrc.parishnurses.org

Lutheran Services

The national organization's Web site provides an address and phone directory to local services, as well as the ability to search by services needed. 800/664-3848 (toll-free)
www.lutherservices.org

Shepherd's Centers

800/547-7073 (toll-free)

www.shepherdcenters.org

Stephen Ministries

314/428-2600

www.stephenministries.org

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family caregivers and their loved ones, including care coordination, transportation, family counseling, support groups, and home visits. Two unique services are home-delivered kosher meals and specialized services for Holocaust survivors. Another service is The Elder Support Network, which offers help to elders whose families live far away. Services vary by community. Some services are covered by insurance or require payment while others are available on a sliding fee basis or at no cost.

Colleen Mallen, senior services coordinator for the Jewish Family Service of San Diego, says, "We get calls from doctors, workers in healthcare facilities, family members, and community agencies. One thing people need to know is that we're here to serve everyone."

In addition to the Jewish Family and Children's Agencies, there are other initiatives under way in the Jewish community. Rabbi Arthur Address, director of the Union for Reform Judaism's Department of Jewish Family Concerns, describes

Do You Want to Enlist the Support of Your Faith-Based Organization?

The National Family Caregivers Association has a brochure specifically designed to help faith-based organizations establish support services for family caregivers. "Supporting Caregiving Families, A Guide for Congregations and Parishes" can be obtained by contacting NFCA at 800/896-3650. NFCA also has developed interfaith and faith-based services to honor family caregivers, as well as instructions on how to organize a service.

the Sacred Aging project, which has as one of its components a section on asking congregations to develop programs that support family caregivers. Among the project's initiatives are the development of special rituals and programs for "shomers," or caregivers, and blessings for caregivers and families who are dealing with mental illness. In addition, Rabbi Address and Rabbi Hara Person are co-editors of the book *That You May Live Long: Caring for Our Aging Parents, Caring for Ourselves*. The book is the first of its type in the Jewish community that deals with caring for aging parents and the caregiver. A study guide for congregations, based on the book, has recently been completed.

Catholic Charities USA

Founded in 1910 as the National Conference of Catholic Charities, Catholic Charities USA is one of the nation's largest social service networks. Various Catholic Charities agencies provide a wide range of services, including emergency assistance, housing assistance, and parenting education. Catholic Charities often work alongside other agencies. The services of each Catholic Charities agency are unique to the needs of the community, and are available to all, regardless of religious belief.

In Joliet, Illinois, seniors can find help with money management or utilize adult day services. In Albany, New York, the Caregivers Respite program offers everything from friendly visiting to respite to home maintenance. Catholic Social Service in Phoenix, Arizona, offers home health services of aides, nurses, and social workers for persons age 60 and older. In Cincinnati, Ohio, the Caregiver Assistance Network provides caregiver education and training, support groups, a "CARE line," and consultation services.

Lutheran Services in America

Lutheran Services in America (LSA) is an alliance of the Evangeli-

cal Lutheran Church in America, The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod, and their related social ministry organizations. Lutheran service agencies can be found in 3,000 communities throughout the United States and the Caribbean.

Lutheran Service agencies provide assistance to six million individuals annually. Services are provided without regard for religious affiliation. Many services are provided on a donation basis, a sliding scale fee, or at no cost. Some services are covered by insurance.

The extent of services available in each community varies. For example, Lutheran congregations in Montana are working to create groups of volunteers to support rural caregivers and their loved ones. In other communities, services may range from caregiver support groups to respite care to adult day services or assisted living facilities.

Each of the organizations listed above provides some type of information, resources, and training. It's important to remember that as with any service organization, you may not always find the exact help you need depending on your particular situation. Since these organizations may use different terms to describe their services, be specific about the type of help you are seeking. Keep in mind that it may take a bit of extra effort to find these services or similar services in your community. In the end, the search is always worthwhile because you invariably learn something new; and, if you are able to locate the help you need, you just may find the answer to your prayers. ■

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References:

¹ "A Great Need, A Greater Reservoir of Good Will," Harris Interactive and The Johns Hopkins University for the Faith in Action program.

² Independent Sector, 1996.