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Posted on Wed, Oct. 01, 2008

Modesto hospice reaches out to those caring for aging relatives

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last updated: October 01, 2008 07:50:05 AM

It started six years ago after her mother had knee replacement surgery.

Pam Ghiotto said her mother, Maude Torres of Manteca, became quiet and had trouble remembering things. Her concern turned to fear when her mother walked into her Salida home and acted as though she had never been there before.

Today, Ghiotto, who is 65, cares for her 89-year-old mother, sharing the duties with two brothers and a sister-in-law.

Torres has an unspecified form of dementia, requiring family members to take turns watching her. When her mother comes to her home, Ghiotto likes to take her shopping or to lunch, or they just sit in the garden of Ghiotto's home.

"Every day we see such a decline," Ghiotto says. "She is reverting back to her childhood, asking where her mom is and dad is and where her husband is. She is close to the advanced stages of dementia."

More and more people are caring for an older family member, a job that is stressful, emotionally draining and sometimes a financial hardship.

About 16 percent of California households are caring for someone age 50 and older, and the numbers are certain to grow as baby boomers assume care of their aging parents. According to state statistics, Stanislaus County has 25,900 seniors age 75 and older, and 13,750 of those seniors live alone.

Community Hospice Inc. of Modesto has launched an outreach campaign to provide education for family members who are caring for a parent, grandparent or older relative. The resources include:

An informational Web site, KnowWhat2Do.org.

A caregiver tool kit for organizing records and financial information.

Monthly Lunch & Learn events starting in October at the Community Hospice offices in Modesto. At the free luncheons, experts will talk about navigating the health-care maze, legal matters and other information that caregivers need to know.

The outreach is coordinated with the Stanislaus County Department of Aging and Veterans Services and senior organizations. People don't have to be caring for a terminally ill family member to receive assistance.

New territory for Hospice

The campaign is cutting new ground for Community Hospice, an organization tasked with nursing people in the final days of life and consoling grief-stricken families.

Harold Peterson, chief executive officer for Community Hospice, said the hospice has always been keenly aware of family caregivers and their ordeals but never provided support until the patient became terminally ill.

People caring for an elderly parent often don't know what resources are available, Peterson said. They have to educate themselves quickly on everything from the parent's health-care needs and medications, to personal finances and legal issues.

Often, they just muddle through on their own.



Maude Torres, 89, enjoys spending time chatting with her daughter Pam Ghiotto, 65, in Ghiotto's back yard. Ghiotto says she relishes this time with her mother and 'just being.' Ghiotto is a caregiver for her mother and also a Hospice volunteer. - Modesto Bee - Bart Ah You

"I found myself becoming an attorney, an accountant and pharmacist for my dad," said Marcia Herrmann, a Modesto businesswoman who cared for her father in his final years.

Family members may discover their parent is forgetting to pay bills or no longer able to manage finances. Power of attorney enables family caregivers to take over those responsibilities. Family caregivers may also consider an advance medical directive that expresses the parent's wishes in event of terminal illness.

The federal Medicare program, with its different coverage levels and drug plans, can be perplexing for seniors and caregivers. The first Lunch & Learn event on Oct. 7 will have a presentation on Medicare basics.

For some, caregiving becomes a full-time job involving grocery shopping, cooking and housekeeping for the elder parent. In time, family members might have to assist with bathing and dressing or pushing the parent in a wheelchair.

Hospice officials said that in-home care and adult day health care programs are available so caregivers can have a break. The campaign also is providing information on support groups and services that provide transportation to medical appointments.

"There is a network of services out there, but most people don't know how to connect to it," said Marian Kaanon, marketing director for Community Hospice.

Ghiotto said she's lucky to have a family that shares the burden. Her older brother obtained legal authority to have their mother's Social Security and a Navy pension automatically deposited in the bank.

Torres, a Navy civilian employee before she retired in 1981, lives with her son in Manteca and also spends time at Ghiotto's home. She still dresses herself and does her own laundry. Ghiotto tries to keep her stimulated, even tearing a hole in a piece of clothing so her mother can use a needle and thread.

Job never stops

The difficult decision of whether to place her in a senior facility is approaching, although none of the options they can afford has been appealing.

"We have part-time jobs to make ends meet," Ghiotto said. "There are facilities that we love but what they are charging is unbelievable."

The job of caring for her mother never stops, but it isn't all gloom and doom, said Ghiotto, who keeps a blog on KnowWhat2Do.org.

They enjoy talking about their mother's younger days, when the Hawaii native played tennis, was on a rowing team and was a professional hula dancer. Torres tells vivid stories about her family putting black curtains over the windows at home after the Pearl Harbor attacks, but can't remember something her daughter said a minute ago.

"It's about patience and compassion and understanding and not arguing," Ghiotto said of the caregiving experience. "What I make of every day is going to make her life more pleasant."

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