

Caregiver's Corner Column (October 2012)

Advocacy Tips for Family Caregivers

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Families provide the majority of care to chronically ill and disabled loved ones. These families understand the challenges of caring for someone with long-term conditions and know what the important issues are. This puts family caregivers in a position to act as advocates, and educate elected officials charged with development of public policy and funding priorities.

WRITE or e-mail a letter to your elected representative.

- Be brief – Boil your message down to one page or less and attach any detailed information, charts, etc. on separate sheets.
- Be direct – Tell the elected official what action you want him/her to take. Ask him/her to respond to your letter. Be sure to include your address and phone number.
- Be civil!
- Use your own words. You don't need to type the letter – handwritten letters are very effective if you have legible handwriting.
- Focus on one issue – Your letter will have the most impact if you speak out on one issue at a time.
- Have the facts – The more facts you know, the better. Refer to legislation by title or number. Cite experts to back up your arguments.
- Compliment – Elected officials are human and like to be recognized and thanked for their work. Always write a thank you note.

PHONE

The most effective calls are to the legislators' Capitol offices, particularly when a vote is imminent.

- Identify yourself – Give your name and city, and say you are a constituent with a concern.
- Be flexible – Ask to speak to the elected official directly, but speaking to his/her aide is also effective. Aides do a lot of research for legislators and often recommend what they should do.
- Identify the issue – Have notes handy with the specific bill number or title and any statistics you want to convey.
- Be polite – Do not threaten with the power of your vote.
- Ask for Information – Elected officials have lots of valuable information that they are more than willing to share. Ask when action is expected on your issue. Ask about the opposition and what impact they are having.
- Ask for support – Ask if the elected official already has a position on your issue and how he/she intends to vote.
- Ask friends to make calls – One call is powerful and five is even more so.

VISIT

Meeting face-to-face with a legislator or designated staff is an excellent way to establish a relationship and convey your point of view.

- Be a good listener and hear out what the official has to say.
- Be concise and clear about your interests.
- Offer to serve as a resource.
- Respect the right of the official to disagree with you and vote against your issue but try to establish a common interest
- Provide written materials – one-page handouts are effective.
- Follow up on any commitments made.
- Thank the official for his/her time and interest in your issue.
- Don't go over the allotted time unless it's obvious the official wants to spend more time with you.
- Don't criticize people on a personal level – talk about the issue.
- Don't ask for more than one meeting with the same official on the same issue unless you have something different to say.
- Don't tell the official what he/she "should" do. Put your message in the form of a request and explain how his/her action will affect constituents.
- Don't burn your bridges. Show no anger or resentment toward officials who vote or act against you. You may need their support on another issue.

In order to be an effective advocate, family caregivers need to be well informed and educated. The Caregiver Resource Network (CRN) website provides a variety of tools to educate and inform family caregivers. Also, in November 2012, the CRN is offering a special *Family Caregiver Series* featuring 22 different events designed to educate, inform, recognize and pamper family caregivers. Check out the CRN website (www.CaregiverResource.net) for more information.

Caregiver's Corner is provided as a public service of the **Caregiver Resource Network**. The Caregiver Resource Network is a collaboration of West Michigan organizations dedicated to providing for the needs and welfare of family and professional caregivers within the community. Funded by the Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan with Older American's Act Title III-E, Family Caregiver Support funds. For more information consult our website at www.CaregiverResource.net or call toll free at 1-888-456-5664.

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