

LONG DISTANCE CAREGIVING.....

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The telephone might ring at any moment, informing you that your elderly parent needs your help. That telephone call has already come for 47% of the workforce. The call might be initiated by an acute care hospital, an Adult Protective Service social worker calling from another state, or another concerned family member. You may also become aware of the need for your care through your own telephone conversations with your loved one. Once you determine that a trip to help your loved one will have to be made, there are some important steps to take in advance to maximize the time that you have available.

Knowing that you may need to take time away from your job, you may wish to begin by checking with the employee benefits department for your employer to determine if you are covered by the Family Leave Act (FMLA). This act entitles eligible employees to take up to twelve weeks of unpaid leave. If you have sick time or vacation time due you, you may also receive those benefits. Be sure to ask about the supplemental benefits available in your state of residence.

Before you leave, utilize your telephone and internet to identify resources in the immediate area of your loved one. If you wish to maintain a loved one in their community of residence, it is vital to rely on the resources provided in that specific location. Make appointments with your elderly parent's social worker, physician, lawyer, or accountant ahead of time. Be sure and take copies of the important papers you hold for that loved one, such as Power of Attorney, Durable Power of Attorney for Healthcare, and Living Trust. If you have the time, consider speaking with friends, neighbors, or the religious leaders in the community. Their observations and suggestions may be helpful in creating an ongoing plan of care for your family member.

Upon arrival, be prepared to ask your loved one some really tough questions. This step is important in establishing the wishes of your loved one, in the event they become incapacitated. Have they executed a Durable Power of Attorney for Healthcare, Durable Power of Attorney, or Living Trust? Do they wish to receive "heroic measures" such as CPR? Have they considered appointing a surrogate decision maker for healthcare or financial matters?

In the event that a loved one no longer has capacity for decision-making, it may be necessary to locate any documents that the person has executed and filed with the county recorder, a physician, lawyer, or alternate family member.

Going to the home of your loved one is an important step in evaluating their continuing ability to live independently. Use all your senses to assess the living conditions of your family member:

- Are their unusual odors or evidence of an inability to bath or dress?
- Are grab bars and non-slip mats installed?
- Is there a nutritious and adequate food supply in the home?

- Does the person appear to be eating meals and taking medications regularly?
- Has mail accumulated, have bills gone unpaid, are accounts overdrawn, or has there been a fraud victimization?
- Is the loved one visited regularly by friends, relatives or church members?
- Is transportation available?
- How far away is the nearest neighbor?

Assessing these issues will help you determine what supportive services need to be in place to ensure the safety and comfort of your family member.

If it has been recommended to you that your loved one be placed in a facility, you may wish to work with the discharge planner or social worker to facilitate the move. Whether you are looking at an assisted living or residential care facility, review their latest survey, visit the facility, and plan on maintaining ongoing communication with staff and friends who visit regularly. You may wish to schedule a time when you can call either your family member, or a facility staff member (social service designee or activities director are good), to obtain regular updates on the person's condition and current needs.

Realize that other family members, or even your loved one, may express resentment rather than appreciation of your effort. Build a support system among other caregivers, a clergyman, or counselor. Whenever possible, have a family meeting to discuss how things are working. Share any recent changes in your caregiving role, such as increasing fiscal or emotional responsibilities. And don't be afraid to ask for help. Know that even the best caregivers feel a sense of guilt, believing that they have "failed to do enough."

ALL OF THE FOLLOWING INTERNET RESOURCES ARE EASILY AVAILABLE AT VITAL CONNECTIONS <www.vitalco.net/Caregiver.htm> :

Administration on Aging: Extensive links to local agencies on aging.

AARP: Caregiving articles, online store, legal assistance.

Alzheimer's Association

Family Caregiver Alliance

Federal Citizen Information Center: Request the "Your Guide to Choosing a Nursing Home" publication and informational pamphlets on other subjects.

Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation: Talking With Your Parents About Medicare and Health Coverage

In Home Medical Supplies: Various products.

National Academy of Elder Law Attorneys: Non-profit provides a resource of information, education, networking and assistance to those who must deal with the many specialized issues involved with legal services to the elderly and disabled.

National Association of Professional Geriatric Care Managers: Locate a professional care manager near your loved one.

National Council on Aging's Benefits Checkup

National Meals on Wheels Foundation: Locate organizations that can provide service for individuals.

Mail Order Medical Supply: Various products.

Medline Plus Health Information: A service of the U.S. National Library of Medicine and the National Institutes of Health.

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