

## Caregiver best advocate for loved one

- April, 2005  
By Eileen Beal

All people 65 and over, not just low-income seniors or those with serious physical or mental conditions, are eligible for state and local discounts; federal, state, and community programs; and low- or no-cost medical and social service programs. Most of these freebies and near-freebies don't just make older adults' lives better, richer and more rewarding, they help lighten the financial, physical, and emotional stress load for caregivers, too.

That's the good news.

The bad news is that far too many older adults aren't tapping into the benefits, programs and services they are eligible for.

One reason they aren't is that they, or their caregivers, don't know about them. For example, few veterans know that they are eligible for Federal assistance to cover some of the costs of assisted living.

Another reason is pride. Citing the low number of seniors (9% nationally) enrolled in the food stamp program, the Ohio Department of Aging's director, Joan W. Lawrence asks: "Which is worse, applying for and using something you are entitled to or continuing to deny yourself a valuable benefit because of pride?"

But the biggest reason older adults aren't tapping into the "valuable benefits" they are eligible for is that they don't have someone—an advocate—to coordinate all the leg- and paperwork it takes to get them the services and/or programs they are entitled to. "The squeaky wheel gets the grease," says Sharen Eckert, vice president for advocacy and public policy development at Benjamin Rose. "When an older adult has someone advocating for them in 'the system' they are going to get a richer package of services and more of their needs met."

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That means that caregivers—spouses, adult children, friends—must add advocate to their job description. “Being an advocate is all about finding resources—people, agencies, programs, and services,” Eckert says. “But in the Cleveland-area to do that you don’t have to start from scratch.”

Citing the telephone referral service at United Way’s First Call for Help (216-436-2000); the Older Adults Resource Guide and Supportive Housing for Older Persons Directory published by the Western Reserve Area Agency on Aging (free with a call to 800-626-7277); and the information and expertise found at the Cuyahoga County Department of Senior and Adult Services (216-420-6750), Eckert adds: “These three [organizations] can definitely point you in the right direction.”

It’s scary taking on the advocate’s role. Besides doing research, you have to become pushy, demanding and vigilant, and you have to plan and strategize like a general. “If you haven’t developed those skills in other situations,” admits Eckert, “it can be daunting.”

The role gets less daunting once you realize you are not alone.

When an elderly person is hospitalized, hospital ombudsmen and discharge planners are on call 24/7 to give information, answer questions, offer advice, and problem-solve. They are also the best source of information about how to get help with medical expenses and who qualifies for help.

Clergy, elected officials, and directors of Offices on Aging and senior centers are also sources of information and leads on agencies and organizations that can help you. So are the intake departments at senior-focused agencies, such as Benjamin Rose (216-791-8000), Catholic Charities (216-334-2969), and Jewish Family Services (216-292-3999).

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So are groups—such as the Arthritis Foundation or the Alzheimer’s Association—that deal with a specific medical condition. “They have a good network of providers that are skilled in that disease’s care and management. And they have good materials, programs and support groups, too,” says Eckert.

Don’t downplay the importance of support groups to turn you into an effective advocate, says Berice Harel, director of the Tri-City Consortium on Aging. “In support groups you learn about resources and financial and legal issues,” she adds. “But more to the point, you are going to hear from others—about coping strategies, techniques, and programs—who are going through the same things you are going through.”

Case managers (also called care coordinators or geriatric care managers) are another resource to tap into, especially for long-distance caregiving. “[Case managers] help you navigate whatever system you are in because they have the expertise, the resources, and the information that helps you plan and strategize and set goals and measure success,” explains Eckert. (National Association of Geriatric Care Managers: [www.caremanagers.org](http://www.caremanagers.org))

For more information on how to become an effective advocate for a loved one, consult:

Caring for the Parents Who Cared for You, Kenneth P. Scileppi, MD

The Comfort of Home, Maria M. Meyer and Paula Derr, RN

Taking Care of Aging Family Members: A Practical Guide, Wendy Lustbader and Nancy Hooyman