

With a Little Help, Elderly Can Live at Home

Sponsor: Vista Health

Location: Waukegan, IL

Whether it's a steadying hand to help them get into a car, or someone to come by on the weekend to help with yard work or clean the house, assistance provided by Vista Elder Care volunteers is designed to foster one thing: independence.

Darlene Lonasky says it is a blessing for her mother, Helen Claggett. "I can't tell you what a difference it has made toward her well-being," Lonasky says. "She loved living in her home, even though it became more difficult to manage daily tasks. That's where Elder Care bridged the gap and made it possible for her to remain and receive wonderful care."

Vista Health hired Karen Majkrzak in 1997 to start a program modeled after one she ran in Bridgeport, Conn. A year later, the newly formed Elder Care served its first client. Since then, 889 volunteers, including 36 registered nurses, have logged more than 24,000 hours helping 1,037 elderly patients by transporting them to appointments, visiting them in their homes, taking them shopping and preparing meals.

Volunteers have made up to 1,786 trips to doctors' offices alone. "Having someone in the doctor's office with them makes their visit go a lot better," Majkrzak says. "For a change, they're not anxious about how they're going to get home."

One component of the program, Timeout: Volunteer Respite Care, provides free non-medical help to family caregivers and their loved ones, particularly those who suffer from debilitating ailments such as Alzheimer's disease, stroke or heart failure. "Placing a trained volunteer into that situation makes it possible for the elderly person to say, 'Yes, I can stay at home. I can be independent, even if I need assistance,'" Majkrzak says.

The program also gives caregivers some much-needed freedom. "It is great to know that I can leave the house for a few hours to run errands or to have the opportunity to participate in projects that I have enjoyed in the past," Dorothy Kelly writes in praise of the program. "The program truly gives me peace of mind as I step out the door."

The Problem: Elderly with health problems lacked care at home and transportation to the doctors' offices.

The Players: Vista Health and community volunteers.

The Plan: Provide service for low-income, frail homebound elders to help them maintain their health and promote their independence, enabling them to cope with problems at home rather than in a nursing facility.

The Results: More than 1,000 homebound elders served by 853 volunteers and 36 registered nurses providing 24,431 hours of service, including 1,786 trips to medical appointments.

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