

Older and Wiser: Family caregivers need our full support

May is Family Caregiver Awareness Month, and we should take this time to reach out to our friends and neighbours doing this vital work, writes columnist Margaret Coates.

Margaret Coates

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May is Family Caregiver Awareness Month, a time to praise and support community members doing this vital work. Getty Images

I bet that you or someone you know is offering care to a friend or a family member.

According to the Family Caregivers of British Columbia, 26.5 per cent of our population is made up of caregivers. Most caregivers are providing their service free, and this contributes billions of dollars to our economy annually. It seems that most of us at some point will take on the role of caregiver when a loved one or a friend needs support.

The month of May marks Family Caregiver Awareness Month. As the FCBC says, "Please help to make some noise and increase awareness of unpaid family and friend caregivers. Reach out to your networks – family, friends, neighbours, and workplaces."

Why do we need to raise awareness? The answer is that caregivers are often unrecognized, unsupported, and underappreciated. But the role of the unpaid caregiver cannot be underestimated. According to the Canadian Association of Retired People, in a recent survey called Supporting the Supporters, Unpaid Caregiving in Canada: “this unpaid labour estimated at \$25 billion annually is being shouldered by millions of Canadians, over one million of whom are over age 65.” Women are the most likely to provide support, often having to leave the work force or change their lives considerably to provide care.

It has been estimated that the economic value of unpaid caregivers who look after seniors can further save Canada’s healthcare system up to \$31 billion annually.

During COVID-19, much more caregiving fell on already beleaguered seniors as programs and services were curtailed because of provincial health orders. At the same time, supports for caregivers such as respite or day programs and supports from family and friends were restricted because of the pandemic. Many caregivers reported increased mental and physical health issues. Despite these issues, seniors rose to the challenge.

Family caregivers are often a relative or friend who provides care and support to someone living with disease, disability, or frailty due to aging. Women are the most likely to provide support, often having to leave the work force or change their lives considerably to provide care.

The ongoing work of caregivers may involve transportation to appointments, or transport to a specific program targeted at the loved one or friend. Caregivers may also provide personal care such as bathing, hygiene, mobility assistance, dressing and assisting with eating. Or they might provide supports like phone check-ins, companionship and emotional care, medication management, light housekeeping, gardening, and yard work. Or caregiving can entail providing other housekeeping support such as preparing meals, running errands, and yard work. Some caregivers might also provide financial aid and support

Now, as the pandemic wanes, programs and services are opening again to assist caregivers. A caregiver could try getting some support through caregiver support groups such as those run by North Shore Community Resources. The NSCR Caregiver Support Program hosts support groups and workshops, consultations and referrals to health care and community services. They offer stress management strategies, resources and more. They can be reached at 604-982-3302, or on [the North Shore Community Resources website](#).

Family Services of the North Shore also offers counselling services for caregivers who are experiencing stress. Call them at 604-988-5281, ext. 226.

Many people in need of support may not have a family member or friend who is able to step in, or the healthcare system may not be available to assist. The private caregiving sector on the North Shore is there to assist if you can afford it. Don’t be afraid to try their support – check the internet for a caregiving support business near you.

According to the CARP survey, caregiving is provided mostly to older Canadians and the need will grow as the number of seniors requiring care will double in the coming years. At the same time the pool of potential caregivers will shrink.

CARP says that there is an urgent need to support caregivers now and in the future. They have recommended that there be a refundable caregiver tax credit, tax-deductible homecare expenses, and national homecare standards and sustainable funding that would allow Canadians to age at home for as long as possible without an increased burden to caregivers.

This May and throughout the year, remember caregivers deserve our support, and perhaps lobby along with CARP for changes in the government system to sustain the caregiver.

Margaret Coates is the co-ordinator of Lionsview Seniors' Planning Society. She has lived on the North Shore for 51 years and has worked for and with seniors for twenty-six of those years. Ideas for future columns are welcome – email lions_view@telus.net.

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