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Long-Distance Caregiving: How to Help Across the Miles

FALLS CHURCH, Virginia– Today’s families are more geographically spread out than they used to be. With many seniors choosing to spend their retirements in warmer climates or their adult children relocating to jobs in other areas of the country, caring for family living far away is a growing concern for many in the United States. Current estimates show that up to seven million Americans are currently providing long-distance care to an elderly loved one.

“In the past, the expectation was that family members would always be there to take care of family members,” said Mark L. Turner, owner of the Northern Virginia office of Right at Home. “Every day, we see the frustration of men and women who live too far away to help their parents or other seniors in their lives as much as they want to.”

Fortunately, many more options exist today to allow families that are geographically separated to help care for seniors. The first challenge families may need to overcome is that many seniors, for generational, emotional or cultural reasons, are reluctant to accept help from people other than family members. “You need to take into account your senior’s concerns in discussing the need for assistance,” said Turner. “An honest conversation is in order to assess the needs of the senior and to find out the kinds of activities they are finding difficult on a daily basis.”

Turner recommends explaining that some extra help will allow them to remain independent. “There are so many different levels of care available, starting with a few hours of help around the house per week. Keeping seniors involved in determining the level of care they need will help ease some of their anxiety.”

Once a need for care is established, the first step families should take is to be prepared before the need for care arises. “Research community-based services in your senior’s community, such as local agencies on aging, in-home supportive care providers and senior centers, so you have a list of resources you can turn to,” said Turner. “You can find this information on the Internet or by picking up a copy of a phone book from your senior’s local area on your next visit.”

Turner also advises being prepared with specific medical, legal and other personal details that pertain to your senior. “Having the names of doctors, medications, insurance policy information and legal counsel will help you make well-informed decisions quickly and efficiently if you suddenly find yourself in that position,” said Turner.

Another way for families to stay involved across the miles is to get creative with their use of modern technologies. “With your senior’s permission, you can ask for e-mail updates from his or her doctors or caregivers,” said Turner. “Better still, ask to be conferenced-in via telephone for medical appointments so that you have first-hand understanding of what is going on with your senior’s health, or have a caregiver attend with them.”

Right at Home is a national franchise organization, with a local office that serves the communities of Northern Virginia. Right at Home offers in-home companion care and hands-on personal care to seniors and other adults to help them continue living independently. For more information, please visit the company’s website at www.RightatHome.net/NOVA.

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