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Health & Wealth: The challenge of independence at home

Published on Wednesday, August 17, 2016

Carol O'Malley had been concerned for some time about her 87-year-old mother Bridget. She was still living alone in the family home where Carol grew up. After Carol's dad passed away 10 years ago, Bridget was doing all the home maintenance and repairs herself. In the past year, Bridget was diagnosed with COPD and heart problems, visibly struggling with her chores. When Carol brought up the topic of moving to an assisted-living center closer to her own house, Bridget was adamantly opposed.

"This is my home and I am perfectly capable of taking care of it. I would never want to live somewhere unfamiliar with strangers minding my business," Bridget said. This can be a typical situation for many baby boomers like Carol who are responsible for their parents' health and safety. In countless national surveys, results overwhelmingly show that the number one fear our seniors have is the fear of loss of independence.

This is especially true of New Englanders, where self-sufficiency and privacy are cherished as emblems of pride. This pride and stubbornness is part of what makes them such a hardy and resourceful lot. But as they age, it can result in a refusal to ask for help.

It's only when faced with the desperation of an acute crisis that they finally seek assistance.

Americans have been taught that we can get where we want through our own initiative and hard work; asking for help is perceived as a statement of failure. If we sit down with our elders and list the many ways they have received assistance in the past, they might be surprised at the extent of that list. If they think about all the different times they provided support or help to others throughout their lives, that list would likely be as long, or even longer.

So why, when faced with something as dire as a health crisis or financial emergency, are elders reluctant or even ashamed to ask for help?

Certainly there are some cultural issues that may limit a person's willingness to reach out. We are fortunate in this community to have an abundance of social and health service providers. Many of them are underutilized.

Let's use hospice as an example. With the many different hospice providers in this region, it's estimated that all those agencies together are serving half the patients and families considered eligible for hospice care at any one time. People experiencing serious illness typically prefer to be cared for at home, surrounded by their loved ones and enjoying the best possible quality of life.

At Hope Hospice, our expertise lies in fulfilling that goal whenever possible. Most of our services, including patient care, medications, supplies, equipment or counseling, are funded through Medicare or private insurance. We can serve patients for whatever amount of time they're eligible. Nationally, half the patients served by hospice only receive services for less than 18 days, often due to the fact that people are unaware of these benefits or reluctant to ask for help too early. That makes it challenging for the hospice team to meet the full range of physical, emotional and spiritual needs of the patient and family.

As Bridget's health challenges mounted until she was given a life-limiting diagnosis, Carol was able to bring in a social worker from the local Aging Services Access Point to have a practical conversation with her mother about options for care. Bridget admitted that she did, in fact, need help. Having hospice at home, supplemented with minor home modifications and other services, allowed Bridget to remain in the home she loved, with the comfort and support that gave both her and Carol peace of mind.

Consider some possible resources to explore when considering independence at home for elders:

- Aging Services Access Points (ASAPs): Bristol Elder Services, Coastline Elder

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Aging services across the Cape Cod & the Islands
Services, South Shore Elder Services, Old Colony Elder Services, Elder Services of Cape Cod & the Islands

- Councils on Aging in every town – include services such as Meals on Wheels, transportation, programs, outreach
- SHINE - financial, insurance counseling
- Mass211.org
- Eldercare.gov
- HopeHealth services
- Home health agencies
- Veterans benefits

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This article was published in the Summer 2016 issue of Health & Wealth.

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