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DAILY RECORD, MORRIS COUNTY

Pledging care to county's caregivers

Group offers resources to ease burden, responsibility of aiding a relative with health problems

BY MEG HUELSMAN
DAILY RECORD

Liz de Nesnera was 30 when her mother moved in with her after having a stroke that left her permanently paralyzed on her right side and bound to a wheelchair.

Within the year, her father was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease and moved in, too.

Now, 11 years later, the Pompton Lakes resident has learned to organize taking care of her mother, getting married, having a home and going out to dinner with her husband.

She also is the northern New Jersey representative of the National Family Caregivers Association. She speaks across the state on behalf of the Caregiver's Community Action Network to create policy change and recognize caregivers' dedication.

"I had to rearrange my work schedule and took off Wednesdays to take my mother to the doctor's, do the grocery shopping and pay the bills," de Nesnera said. "Caregivers just don't have enough time to do everything that has to be done. Spontaneity left my life 11 years ago; you are caring for someone 24 hours a day."

De Nesnera also has joined the new Morris County Caregivers Coalition.

United Way of Morris County has created the Caregivers Coalition to improve services for family members who are supporting seniors or special needs children, and to advocate policies and legislation to help identify and support caregivers.

"Senior citizens are living longer, and we need to start paying attention to the family members who are caring for them," said Carol DeGraw, community impact manager for the United Way of Morris County. "The coalition is about creating policy change, increasing public awareness and developing innovative solutions to complex problems."

According to the national Family Caregiving Alliance, the value of care that informal, unpaid family caregivers provide is estimated to be \$257 billion.

"We want to reach out to all caregivers,

How to join

The Caregivers Coalition meets on the second Wednesday of each month from 9:15 to 11:30 a.m. at the Morris County Library in Hanover. For more information or to contact the coalition, visit www.uwmorris.org or call Karen Donofrio at (973) 993-1160, Ext. 139.

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because we've recognized that they need support," DeGraw said. "We created this coalition to help families and inform them of the resources available to them. Most caregivers are not even aware that they are caregivers, but consider themselves loving parents, children or siblings."

More than 42,000 unpaid caregivers in Morris County and more than 830,000 across the

state care for children, adults or seniors with chronic and disabling health conditions.

"There's a really scary fact that says that 60 percent of caregivers actually die before the person they are caring for does," DeGraw said. "We can't afford, as a society, to take care of all these folks."

The average caregiver provides 18 hours a week of care, which can lead to additional problems at home. More than 50 percent of caregivers are employed full-time and have often passed up job promotions, additional training or moved from full-time jobs to part-time

hours, United Way officials said.

"I think that this is a health issue we're dealing with," DeGraw said. "There are higher levels of depression, anxiety and other mental health challenges for caregivers. Researchers have found that more than one-third of caregivers who provide intense and continuing care to others suffer from poor health themselves."

The new coalition includes 100 volunteers. The group met for the first time last January.

"Many caregivers are isolated, home alone and not aware of the resources," United Way

Marketing Director Jean Funk said.

"The coalition is an awesome, awesome idea," de Nesnera said. "A lot of us feel alone. You don't decide one day to be a caregiver. You do this out of love for the person you're caring for, but it's still a lot of work. The coalition is hoping to work to alleviate some of the alone-ness."

Since the coalition formed, representatives from nonprofit and private organizations and family caregivers meet monthly to talk about issues pertaining to the daily care of disabled, elderly and ill family members.

"Each meeting starts with a

family member's story,"

DeGraw said. "There was one woman who hasn't had a night out to dinner with her husband since 1992 because she has a special needs child and it's difficult to get someone to stay with the child."

Just planning a night out to dinner can be quite an adventure for some of the caregivers."

De Nesnera offered this

observation:

"I think that there are only three types of people," she said. "You are either not a caregiver yet, you are a caregiver, or you were a caregiver. Generally, everyone will be one at some point in their life."

Meg Huelsman can be reached at mhuelsman@gannett.com or (973) 428-6621.