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Meeting the Needs of Older Americans

Susan remembers well her father's role as the chief authority figure during her childhood. Now 40, she has watched over the past four years as Alzheimer's-like dementia has robbed her father of his ability to remember and function normally. At the same time, Susan notes, her mother Betty has been forced to take over all the decision-making duties for herself and her husband. In fact, she has now essentially become his caretaker in their Charlottesville, Virginia home.

Susan was one of the first among her five brothers and sisters to detect signs of the change in her father. "At first, I don't think anyone wanted to acknowledge it," she recalls. But as the signs mounted, Susan, who lives two hours away from her parents, contacted the Jefferson Area Board on Aging (JABA), an agency that is part of the country's National Aging Services Network. It was the beginning of a sometimes painful but necessary transition for Susan and her entire family.

During her call to the staff at JABA, Susan's described her father's changing behavior. The staff listened, asked questions and discussed possible home and community-based programs and services. The agency followed up by sending her a packet of information, including material about Alzheimer's disease, long-term care options, caregiver issues, as well as contact information for service providers in the Charlottesville area available to assist her parents.

After looking through the materials Susan and Betty discussed their options. Betty has been looking into some of the services available locally that will help her help both her and her husband, such as respite care. "If there is any positive aspect to my dad's condition," Susan observes, "it's that my mom has started using strengths and abilities that she rarely needed when our dad was healthy. In some ways, she's changed as much as he has."

Since 1965, the Older Americans Act has provided funding for services to meet the diverse needs of older persons in the United States through the National Aging Services Network (the Aging Network). Headed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Aging, the Aging Network includes federal, state, and local agencies that help ensure that older Americans and their families have the information and assistance they need. These resources help families care for their loved ones, help older people stay in their homes, and provide care options other than nursing home facilities.

"Our partners in the Aging Network help older Americans access a broad variety of services and programs," said Josefina G. Carbonell, Assistant Secretary for Aging in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. "Through state and local providers, the Aging Network helps older people and their caregivers live with independence, dignity, and respect."

Older Americans Act programs serve as a gateway to services and support for older Americans and their families such as information and assistance, home & community-based services, elder abuse prevention, home-delivered meals, and services for caregivers. In addition, the Aging Network can help arrange a broad selection of supportive services, such as transportation to and from medical appointments, handyman, chore, and personal care services.

Older adults can also use resources available through the Aging Network to learn about how to lead healthier lifestyles, and thus enjoy a better quality of life. For example, many Aging Network partners educate elders and their caregivers about chronic diseases that can be prevented by staying physically active, eating a proper diet, getting regular medical screenings, and maintaining a meaningful social life.

A One-of-Kind Resource!

To help older Americans access the National Aging Services Network, the AoA created the Eldercare Locator, a national toll-free public directory assistance service and Web site. Whether you are an older individual in search of assistance or a caregiver looking for help in meeting a loved one's needs, the Eldercare Locator can help you find a solution.

Rob, who lives in Portland, Oregon, agrees. "My 76-year-old mother now lives by herself in South Carolina. She no longer drives, but other than that, she's fine living at home." He wanted to find transportation options for her, Rob explains, so he called the Eldercare Locator. The staff there listened to his concern, and transferred him directly to the local agency servicing his mother's region. Long-distance caregivers save time, long distance charges, and energy by making just one call.

As the nation celebrates Older American Month, learn more about the National Aging Services Network by visiting www.aoa.gov. This year's theme for Older American Month—"Aging Well, Living Well"—highlights the many ways Americans are getting more enjoyment from their lives as they age.

To locate services in your or your loved one's community, visit www.eldercare.gov or call the Eldercare Locator, between 9 a.m. and 8 p.m. EST, Monday through Friday, at 1-800-677-1116.

