

Leveraging Volunteers to Support Family Caregivers

Introduction

An estimated 53 million Americans provide care for an older adult or someone living with illness or disability.¹ Family caregivers provide a wide range of services, such as transportation, food preparation, housekeeping and personal care, enabling care recipients to live at home or in the setting of their choice with dignity and independence. Without supportive services, nearly 62 percent of caregivers have suggested that the individual they care for would be living in a nursing home.² Additionally, there are at least 2.4 million children being raised by grandparents or other relative caregivers, serving as a safety net and providing care when children's parents are unable.³

This Action Guide is part of a series to help Aging Network organizations develop innovative caregiver services and supports that meet the needs of a growing population of caregivers.

A **family caregiver** is an adult family member or other individual who has a significant relationship with, and who provides a broad range of assistance to, an individual with a chronic or other health condition, disability or functional limitation. This includes any grandparent or relative adult who has primary responsibility for grandchildren or other children who cannot remain with their parents.⁴

The Role of Volunteerism in Family Caregiver Support Programs

Volunteers play a significant role in providing support to family caregivers. According to the USAging's 2020 National Survey of Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs), AAAs use an average of 40 volunteers each year to assist in providing home and community-based services that enable older adults, people with disabilities and caregivers to live independently and with dignity in their communities.⁵ Aging Network organizations rely on volunteers to provide critical services, such as Medicare counseling, health and wellness coaching, meal delivery and transportation.

Research suggests there are benefits for both family caregivers receiving assistance and for the volunteers involved in providing caregiver support programs. In one program, caregivers showed decreased caregiving burden/stress and increased satisfaction with social support and positive aspects of caregiving.⁶ While in the same program, volunteer lay providers were able to gain knowledge, a sense of competence and skills as part of the program. Additionally, the use of lay or peer providers, such as volunteers, may be beneficial in establishing rapport with caregivers and providing culturally meaningful support.⁷

As the older adult population continues to increase and the direct care workforce challenges persist, Aging Network organizations have opportunities to leverage their existing volunteers and create new volunteering opportunities to meet the needs of not only older adults and people with disabilities but also the family caregivers who support them.

Action Steps

Enhancing or scaling a volunteer program is not without its challenges; however, the opportunities and benefits of having a strong pool of volunteers far outweigh the challenges. Before starting a volunteer program, organizations need to consider recruitment strategies, training and costs. Volunteer programs are not free and require infrastructure, investment and financial strategies to sustain them. Below are some action steps to guide organizations in growing their volunteer-based programs.

1. Learn about existing innovative programs for family caregivers.

The following are examples of innovative ways organizations from across the country are using volunteers to support family caregivers.

Program Name: Nelson Enrichment Club

Organization: Here to Stay Wintergreen (HSW) (Nellysford, VA)

Program Description: HSW is a nonprofit organization that is part of the national Village Movement.⁸ HSW operates the Nelson Enrichment Club, a social model of respite care for caregivers delivered by volunteers. The program's mission is to provide a caring and safe environment for individuals experiencing memory loss. To assist people with dementia, the volunteers receive specialized training. The program operates out of a local church, and there is a daily club fee of \$40. Financial assistance is available as funding allows. Participants benefit from an assortment of activities provided by volunteers, such as physical fitness, music therapy, pet therapy, brain games, arts and crafts.

Learn More: www.nelsonrespite.org

Program Name: Volunteer Caregiver Respite Program

Organization: Area Office on Aging of Northwestern Ohio, Inc. (Toledo, OH)

Program Description: The Volunteer Caregiver Respite Program helps family members caring for aging loved ones alleviate stress by providing them with a temporary break. Each week, an AmeriCorps Seniors Retired Senior Volunteer Program member visits with the aging loved one at home for two to four hours so the caregiver has respite. The new relationships formed benefit the volunteer and care recipient while the caregiver gets a much-needed break. The Volunteer Caregiver Respite Program merged two existing programs at this agency—the National Family Caregiver Support Program and the AmeriCorps Seniors Retired Senior Volunteer Program—to provide education and training through community partnerships and coordination for caregivers.

Learn More: areaofficeonaging.com/volunteer/4013

"We both look forward to our volunteer's visits. It is a nice opportunity to get a break. She makes it nice for me to do things around the house that I would not be able to do without her here. Glad for all opportunities to make life better for both of us."
—Volunteer Caregiver Respite Program Family Caregiver

Program Name: Caring Circles

Organization: Area Agency on Aging, Region One (Phoenix, AZ)

Program Description: Caring Circles is a program through which AmeriCorps volunteers age 55 and older serve homebound, isolated older adults throughout Maricopa County in Arizona. AmeriCorps volunteers provide social support, such as home visiting and phone calls, transportation, grocery shopping and prescription pick-up, to help meet the unmet needs of clients on the waiting list for home and community-based services. The AmeriCorps volunteers also recruit additional volunteers from the community to assist in meeting client needs.

Learn More: www.aaaphx.org/area-agency-on-aging-programs/ameriCorps

Program Name: Duet Peer Support Program

Organization: Duet (Phoenix, AZ)

Program Description: This one-on-one emotional support program connects volunteer mentors (experienced family caregivers) with mentees (new family caregivers or those experiencing stress) in a peer relationship. After completing training, each mentor provides weekly phone calls to offer a listening ear and a safe space for discussions about their mentee's concerns. The program helps caregivers understand that their feelings are valid and common, reassures them that they are not alone and provides them with resources and support. Volunteer mentors serve as eyes and ears for Duet's staff and are trained to connect family caregivers who are in distress to Duet staff for help. By offering support, companionship and camaraderie, the program aims to create a network where caregivers can find solace and guidance in their caregiving experience. The program is offered free of charge to family caregivers and is available nationwide.

Learn More: duetaz.org/peer-support-for-caregivers

"The program is wonderful, and my volunteer mentor has been a godsend. Very encouraging, supportive and on top of things. She has definitely contributed to my getting out from under caregiver burnout and stress."
—Duet Family Caregiver Mentee

2. Assess and determine the areas in which volunteers can help support family caregivers.

- Ask caregivers what they need through caregiver assessments and examine opportunities to address gaps in services/supports through volunteer-based programming.
 - Review commonly used caregiver assessment measures, such as [Selected Caregiver Assessment Measures: A Resource Inventory for Practitioners](#).
 - Monitor the National Caregiver Support Collaborative website for additional [information on caregiver assessment best practices](#).
- Consider convening a Community Advisory Board, committee or focus group comprised of caregivers to help shape future volunteer efforts.
- Be bold and pursue "out-of-the-box" ideas for ways to use volunteers. For example, volunteers can help with outreach to engage hard-to-reach family caregiver populations. Check out [Community Care Corps grantee profiles](#) for ideas.

3. Build and strengthen community partnerships with volunteer organizations to serve the needs of family caregivers.

- Conduct an analysis to determine which volunteer programs already exist in the community, where there is capacity and where there is the most need.

- Collaborate with faith-based, state and local organizations to create a pool of volunteers that can help provide respite and other services for family caregivers. Community partnership examples can be found through [Community Care Corps](#).
- Encourage and support local schools and colleges to give credits for providing respite as part of a volunteer service requirement. Find examples here: [Students as Respite Volunteers: A Creative Approach to Supporting Family Caregivers | ARCH National Respite Network & Resource Center](#).

4. Set up a volunteer training program to support caregivers.

- Refer to existing guides for training volunteers such as:
 - a. United Way: [Starting a Volunteer Program](#)
 - b. [Writing a Volunteer Handbook? What You Need to Know](#)

5. Pursue additional funding opportunities to help sustain new or expand volunteer programs.

- Explore opportunities, including creative collaboration opportunities, available through [AmeriCorps Seniors](#).
- Explore national and community foundations that focus on funding caregiving initiatives, such as those listed in the [Grantmakers in Aging Care is Fundamental Guide](#).
- Identify corporate sponsorships such as in-home care services companies eager to advertise their services in the community.

Conclusion

Many states and localities are already leading the way in redefining innovation and solutions for the Aging Network by leveraging volunteers to support family caregivers. In addition to the resources provided in this guide, Aging Network professionals are encouraged to explore the resources available through their states and communities.

Additional Resources

- [ACL–National Family Caregiver Support Program](#)
- [ACL–National Strategy to Support Family Caregivers](#)
- [ARCH National Respite Network & Resource Center](#)
- [Caregiving Smarts Resource Guide, 10th Edition](#)
- [Community Care Corps](#)
 - [Community Care Corps Learning Library](#)
 - [2023–2025 Grantee Snapshots: Volunteer Power Supporting Health at Home](#)
- [Duet Volunteer Opportunities](#)
- [HOSA–Future Health Professionals](#)
- [Initiative for Strategic Volunteer Engagement](#)
- [National Academy for State Health Policy–Supporting Family Caregivers: A Roadmap for States](#)
- [Scripps Gerontology Center–Enhancing Caring Communities Toolkit](#)

- [Village to Village Network](#)
- [Volunteer Engagement Case Studies and Replication Guides](#)
- [Volunteer Engagement Podcast](#)

Acknowledgements

USAging would like to thank the Caregiving Action Guide workgroup comprised of: Adrienne Smith, New Mexico Caregivers Coalition; Ann Wheat, Duet; Arcelia Armstrong, Area Office on Aging of NW Ohio; Chris Beaulieu, Aroostook Agency on Aging; Darya Rahbar, USAging; Justin McBride, Duet; Patzit Aviv, Montgomery County AAA; and Ruth L. Kershner, Montgomery County AAA; with support from USAging staff: Noelle D'Amato, Cara Goldstein, Meredith Hanley and Clairedine Senat, for their major contributions that helped shaped this Action Guide.

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This project is supported by the Administration for Community Living (ACL), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of a financial assistance award totaling \$4,400,000 with 75 percentage funded by ACL/HHS and \$1,476,288 and 25 percentage funded by non-government source(s). The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement by, ACL/HHS, or the U.S. Government.