

New project tries to care for the caregivers

By CAROLYN BLACKMAN, Staff Reporter for Canadian Jewish News

Thursday, 07 August 2008



TORONTO — For the first time, seven Jewish community agencies are joining forces to help people who are caring for aging or ailing family members.

The agencies – Circle of Care, Baycrest, Bernard Betel Centre for Creative Living, Chai Tikvah Foundation, Jewish Family & Child, Jewish Immigrant Aid Services Toronto and Reena – will collaborate to deliver support services through the newly established Family Caregiver Connections Project.

Its goals include co-ordinating existing support programs at partnering agencies, enhancing existing support services, extending outreach and services to previously unidentified family caregivers, and creating new initiatives.

The project is being funded by the province through the Central Local Health Integration Network, as part of the Ontario government's Aging at Home Strategy.

Devora Schwartz-Waxman, **TOP LEFT**, Family Caregiver Connections co-ordinator, said that funding and support for the project reflects the government's and the Jewish community's commitment to supporting seniors for whom diverting and delaying admission to long-term care facilities is possible if appropriate community support services are available.

Schwartz-Waxman said caregivers are often not identified as being caregivers, but in 2005 there were 4.5 million Canadians providing unpaid care for family members.

"Very often, our focus falls on the family member who needs care, but caregivers have lots of needs as well. Their lives change dramatically when they become caregivers. They are an under-represented population in need of help."

The Jewish community is starting to become aware of the large number of such people, she said, because as the population ages, there are more and more them.

Schwartz-Waxman, said the project will offer help to caregivers in such areas as taking time out for themselves without feeling guilty, financial planning, and managing power of attorney issues, as well as assistance for aging caregivers of adult children needing care.

"Making arrangements for [the children] is crucial," she said.

Rochelle Goldman-Brown, executive director of Chai Tikvah Foundation, which provides support services for psychiatrically disabled adults, said that seniors who have adult children with mental health problems need to make sure their children will have an income for the rest

of their lives and that they will be eligible for financial assistance.

“They need to plan for the future of their child before it is too late to access services.”

Immigrant families have particular needs with regard to caregiving, said Romm Gurel, community integration and outreach worker at JIAS Toronto, because seniors are dependent on their families for years before they are eligible for government assistance.

“This reality puts a great burden on the caring families who are left with no choice but to have their aging parents live with them without many of the services offered to Canadian senior citizens,” Gurel said.

Immediate plans for the project include establishing a telephone line to link caregivers to existing community resources; providing transportation and respite care to let caregivers utilize services outside their homes, and holding educational workshops for caregivers.

Linda Jackson, director of community and ambulatory services at Baycrest, said it’s important to reach out to people who don’t think of themselves as caregivers.

“A wife or husband taking care of their spouse at home may not see themselves as a caregiver. They might not realize they could benefit from these services,” Jackson said.

“They don’t recognize themselves as needy, because they don’t think that they’re the ones with needs. It could be an enlightening moment for them to realize that they, too, could use some help. It is fascinating that they have not thought about calling for help for themselves.”

She said research indicates that caregivers often make themselves ill with the physical and emotional stress of taking care of their loved ones. “Our focus will be on outreach and prevention, and the project will allow caregivers respite to access programs for themselves.”

She said that representatives of the agencies have met, and staff members are excited to work together in order to maximize their strengths.

Lorraine Blass, vice-president of Circle of Care, said it’s “highly innovative and unusual” for seven Jewish agencies to work together. “This impressed the funding body tremendously, because each of us has something else to offer.”

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