Supporting Diverse Family Caregivers: Spotlight on AgeOptions

Over 34 million family caregivers in the United States provide physical, emotional, and financial support for an adult age 50 or older. Caregiving is a physically and emotionally demanding role, which can take a toll on the caregiver’s health and well-being. To meet the needs of family caregivers, providers and health plans may benefit from strategies such as respite care, counseling, and training and education.

Family caregivers come from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and health plans report challenges providing supports that meet their cultural needs and preferences. This Spotlight, showcasing AgeOptions, is part of a series highlighting innovative programs supporting diverse family caregivers.

AgeOptions, the Area Agency on Aging of Suburban Cook County, Illinois, advocates, plans, coordinates and funds services for older adults. AgeOptions focuses on serving the African American and Latino communities in the Chicago area. This Spotlight highlights their support services for diverse family caregivers.

Innovative Programs Supporting Diverse Family Caregivers

Through partnerships with faith-based organizations serving diverse communities, AgeOptions learned many family caregivers in these communities had needs that existing support services did not adequately address. Because many of these family caregivers already participated in local faith-based organizations, AgeOptions conducted focus groups and asset-based mapping of local congregations to determine each community’s strengths and areas of need. Results and feedback from this work informed the development of the Caring Together, Living Better program in 2009 and the Paths to Faithful Caregiving training program in 2011.

“My father had a stroke three years ago. Through my church, I participated in a [Caring Together, Living Better] workshop that showed us how people like my father think. This was very helpful. I learned that my father has trouble digesting full sentences, so now when I speak with him I break down my thoughts and try to be more patient.” -Robin

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3 Asset-based mapping is an approach in community development that emphasizes strengths already present in a community, rather than focusing only on needs. More information is available at http://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/library/using-asset-mapping-for-asset-based-community-development.
Caring Together, Living Better

*Caring Together, Living Better* began as a partnership between AgeOptions and African American churches in south suburban Chicago, and has since expanded to faith-based and community organizations serving Latinos in the western suburbs of the Chicago area. The program currently supports families caring for an older adult through five distinct faith-based and two community-based partners. To tailor the program to participating communities, AgeOptions and representatives at each partner site organized caregiver focus groups to identify caregiver needs, resources, and gaps unique to each community. AgeOptions established a foundation of trust and understanding by directly engaging with community members to obtain their insights and perspectives. This understanding, and the feedback from caregiver focus groups, led to the development of the following *Caring Together, Living Better* activities:

- **Caregiver Support Groups**  
  Caregiver support groups provide a space for caregivers to gather and offer guidance and support to one another.

- **Volunteer Respite**  
  The Volunteer Respite program provides background checks and training for respite volunteers. These volunteers are able to provide care recipients with companionship, while giving caregivers a break during the day.

- **Chore Assistance**  
  Volunteers with the Chore Assistance program support family caregivers by performing household tasks, such as cleaning up yards, shoveling snow, and cleaning.

- **Educational Workshops (offered in English and Spanish)**  
  The Educational Workshop program teaches family caregivers about health-related and legal topics associated with caregiving, such as hospice, disease management, and life insurance.

- **Wellness Workshops (offered in English and Spanish)**  
  Wellness Workshop programming provides self-care services for caregivers—including a community paint night promoting intergenerational connections.

- **Caregiver Café**  
  The Caregiver Café, designed to meet the preferences of Latino caregivers, provides a space for community support and conversation, often in Spanish. The Café provides coffee, snacks, activities, and educational materials on various caregiving topics.

“I had no idea about the resources available to caregivers until I started attending the Caregiver Events at Faith Cathedral Church. I’m glad that I came to the Caring Together, Living Better program because I have learned so much and continue to learn.”  
-Lynne

Caregivers participating in community paint night
Paths to Faithful Caregiving

In addition to the Caring Together, Living Better program, AgeOptions has a training program called Paths to Faithful Caregiving. AgeOptions found that existing training programs, which focused on individual-centered and secular caregiving approaches, did not meet the preferences of the African American caregivers in their community. To meet the needs of these caregivers, AgeOptions developed the Paths to Faithful Caregiving program, incorporating group-centered views on caregiving and the elements of faith and spirituality critical to the community’s ways of sustaining themselves and bringing meaning to their caregiving experiences.

Paths to Faithful Caregiving is an adaptation of the University of Illinois Extension’s Caregiving Relationships curriculum. The training includes faith-based exercises developed by researchers from CJE SeniorLife in consultation with caregivers, pastors, and older adults participating in the Caring Together, Living Better program.

The Paths to Faithful Caregiving program highlights the importance of managing stress, locating important resources, and finding strength in spiritual practices when confronted with loss and grief. To reach Spanish-speaking family caregivers, many of whom also prefer faith-based caregiver training programs, AgeOptions is also piloting a day-long, Spanish version of the training program. Participants in the Paths to Faithful Caregiving program have reported increased confidence in managing their responsibilities as a caregiver.

Key Considerations to Support Diverse Family Caregivers

The Caring Together, Living Better and Paths to Faithful Caregiving programs highlight five strategies organizations may want to consider when developing programs for diverse caregivers:

- **Partnering with existing faith-based, cultural, or community organizations.** Seek opportunities to collaborate with organizations already offering cultural, social, and faith-based programming. Caregivers are more likely to access support programs connected to organizations they know and whose programs they already attend, such as churches.

- **Creating training programs that meet the cultural and linguistic preferences of caregivers.** Caregiving is a personal and intimate role. Training that respects and incorporates individuals’ language and cultural preferences, including religious and spiritual beliefs, can help caregivers better manage their roles and receive support in culturally meaningful ways.

- **Implementing appreciative inquiry.** Meet with stakeholders (e.g., caregivers, service providers, representatives from faith-based organizations) to determine how to best support family caregivers in your community. AgeOptions uses appreciative inquiry to identify and inform program activities for caregivers at each of their partner sites. By creating programs specific to each community, AgeOptions provides culturally meaningful services and supports.

- **Leveraging volunteers from the community.** Partner sites in the Caring Together, Living Better program leverage community volunteers to sustain their programs. This also promotes

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4 Appreciative inquiry is an approach to decision making based on leveraging assets and potentials rather than solely focusing on solving problems in existing structures. More information can be found here: [https://appreciativeinquiry.champlain.edu/](https://appreciativeinquiry.champlain.edu/)
integration of the program into the community and provides caregivers with support from peers within their own community.

- **Demonstrating the value of training.** AgeOptions found it helpful to communicate to family caregivers how training can equip them with the tools and resources they need to feel supported in their role, which involves specialized skills, daily tasks, and emotional and physical resources.

### Additional Resources on Caregiving

Want to learn more? The [Resources for Integrated Care](https://www.resourcesforintegratedcare.com) website includes additional resources for health plans and providers supporting family caregivers.

- **Involving and Supporting Family Caregivers In Care Planning and Delivery Webinar:** This webinar provides concrete recommendations for plans and providers on how to best identify, assess, support and engage family caregivers while respecting diverse cultural views.

- **Managing Behaviors Associated with Dementia Resource Guides:** These resource guides—one for caregivers and one for healthcare professionals—provide recommended trainings, toolkits, fact sheets, publications, and newsletters.

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