

During the Covid-19 Outbreak, Public Health Workers Are a Godsend – Thank You

by Jennifer Davis



National Public Health Week

April 6 - 12, 2020

NPHW @ 25: Looking Back, Moving Forward.

Each year we observe National Public Health week in early April. As we all work together to battle the spread of Covid-19, understanding and valuing public health work has never been more important.

What do we mean by public health? Simply stated, public health promotes and protects the health of people and the communities where they live, learn, work and play. Every time we buckle our seatbelts, eat in a restaurant free from cigarette smoke, or send our children to school where they will be fed a nutritious lunch, we benefit from past public health initiatives. Public health care workers include researchers, clinicians, social workers, and those who develop and enforce government policies, among many other disciplines.

A prime example of a public health initiative are programs offered by Elder Services of the Merrimack Valley and North Shore's Healthy Living Center of Excellence (HLCE). HLCE's evidenced-based programs are designed to encourage older people to become active participants in maintaining good health and wellbeing. Included in those served by HLCE are family caregivers of individuals with dementia. These family caregivers are committed to optimizing their loved-one's quality of life and keeping them in their own homes for as long as possible. HLCE offers a program called the Savvy Caregiver, which is a federally funded program based on the needs of caregivers and provides training for those actively caring for a friend or family member living with Alzheimer's and related dementias.

The Impact of Covid-19 on Family Caregivers

In the current environment that prohibits community gatherings, family caregivers of loved ones with dementia are under tremendous pressure. They are cut off from programs that provide tools, services, and support that help them cope with their caregiver responsibilities.

Lyn Brennan, Family Caregiver Support Program Specialist, and Cynthia Hession-Richard, LSW, CDP, Family Caregiver Program Facilitator with Elder Services of the Merrimack Valley and North Shore, have experienced a 40% uptick in contacts from family caregivers who face new challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic. They report that caregivers are:

- cancelling services and taking everything on themselves, leaving them with very little down time;
- experiencing greater sense of isolation as they avoid contact with anyone who might put their loved-one at risk, including delivery service providers;
- struggling with helping their loved ones understand why routines, such as going to adult day health programs are disrupted and keeping them engaged;
- in some cases, caring for grandchildren, as well as loved ones with dementia and finding it next to impossible to practice social distancing among the generations;
- finding it difficult to work from home or tutor school-age children, who live in the same household, while responding to their loved-one's needs;

- experiencing resistance from individuals with dementia who are afraid of water and unwilling to practice recommended hand washing procedures;
- coping with added financial pressure and facing food insecurity as access to food bank supplies becomes limited;
- afraid of running out of supplies or having to choose if it's safe to take their loved-one to the hospital.

Bottom line – many of these caregivers are scared about what the future holds both near and long-term.

The Savvy Caregiver Program is Tested During the Covid-19 Outbreak and Passes with Flying Colors

Lyn and Cynthia are also Savvy Caregiver program trainers. They have found that the skills participants learned have proven to be a godsend in recent weeks. Their patience and ability to respond to their care recipient's needs has been the ultimate test of the Savvy program's efficacy. According to Lyn, "Many caregivers tap into Savvy's toolbox to sooth their family members who become agitated and confused by recent Covid-19 developments." Tips for engaging and calming individuals with dementia include activities tailored to their abilities such as playing music that recalls pleasant memories, putting together puzzles, or simple craft activities.

The ESMV caregiver support team is currently available by phone or online, and they have turned to the Zoom app to provide continuity of support services to Alzheimer's family caregivers, including Savvy. For more information go to esmv.org or call 1-800-892-0890.

The Covid-19 pandemic should remind us how much we depend on each other to stay safe and healthy, and how grateful we should be for the multidisciplinary professionals who devote their careers to promoting public health.

For all of those who continue to support family caregivers any way they can – Thank You!

The Savvy Caregiver Program is an example of the Evidence-Based programs offered by Elder Services of Merrimack Valley and North Shore's Healthy Living Center of Excellence, which means their benefit has been proven or informed by research and evaluation. These programs are designed to promote healthy aging among older people.

A grant from [Harvard Pilgrim Health Care Foundation](http://HarvardPilgrimHealthCareFoundation.org) supports Savvy Caregiver Trainings in Massachusetts, Maine and New Hampshire. With this grant the programs aim to train 40 Master Trainers, who in turn will train community-based coaches to implement workshops for close to 750 program participants.