

Lackawanna College: Training Both Family and Paid Caregivers

Introduction

Increasing numbers of older people needing care, an especially great need for home-based care, the importance of family caregivers and paid professional caregivers, and the crucial difference that caregiver training can make—all of these underscore the importance of the Community College Caregiver Training Initiative.

For the past two years, the International Longevity Center and the Caregiving Project for Older Americans, with support from MetLife Foundation, has promoted development of caregiver training programs at community colleges across the country, through the Community College Caregiver Training Initiative (CTI). The purpose of the initiative is to encourage the expansion of caregiver training programs for both family caregivers and in-home care workers among community colleges, through grants of up to \$25,000.

The 24 winning community colleges to date, 12 from each year of the initiative, serve a diverse group of students in both rural and urban communities. The 24 schools offer a wide variety of content, hours and methods of training, and plans for sustainability. In this Caregiving Brief, we highlight the program developed at Lackawanna College in 2007 under the CTI, based upon our recent conversation with Ann Marie Stelma, Ph.D., director of the CTI program there and vice president of the school's Continuing Education Department.

Lackawanna College: Training Both Family and Paid Caregivers

By Kenneth A. Knapp, Ph.D.

Lackawanna College

Lackawanna College is located in Scranton, in the hills of northeastern Pennsylvania, roughly equidistant—about 125 miles—from both Philadelphia and New York City. Following the decline of the coal industry several decades ago, Scranton's population has steadily declined, and is half today (about 72,000) what it was at its peak in the 1930s.

Unemployment rates in the counties served by Lackawanna College are typically higher than the national average. Younger residents frequently move away from the area once they reach college age. Nearly one in five residents are age 65 or older, much higher than the national rate of about 12%.

These demographic and economic changes present challenges when it comes to providing care to older residents—there is great demand for it, but not enough people trained to do the job. The strain on family caregivers is also high in the area, with the exodus of its younger people. A rural area, services for family caregivers are often difficult to access.

The CTI program at Lackawanna College was developed to address these challenges. We discussed two main features of the program—job creation through partnering activities, and support for family caregivers—with Dr. Stelma. Highlights of that conversation follow. We ask first about Lackawanna's partnership with PathStone, a local non-profit community development and human service origination.

Could you describe your partnership with PathStone?

PathStone helps older adults find work in different fields, which includes training. They are a very well kept secret, which is too bad because they do a lot for people age 55 or older, and we've developed a great relationship with them. The people who go to PathStone have either retired from other jobs or have lost jobs and have not been able to get

back into the workforce. PathStone has been assisting them in doing that.

When we sat down with PathStone and talked about the caregiver training program we wanted to develop, we realized that in many cases their clients needed these services to take care of their own husbands, wives, whatever the situation was. So our program was a great benefit to them in their family situations, but at the same time allowed them to have some marketable skills if they wanted another income source.

How many of your students have you recruited through PathStone?

More than half of the students who have enrolled in our program for Elder Home Health Care Aides have come through PathStone. As I said, all are age 55 or older, and several of them were drawn to the program mainly because they had caregiving responsibilities at home.

How can a family member make the time to take the course?

This is certainly an issue. What we do is offer a variety of time slots. Some of the courses are offered two nights a week part-time, so there is a longer period of time for the course to run but it's easier for them to find someone to help [provide care] if they only have to be away from their family member for 2 ½ to 3 hours, two nights a week. We also offer courses during the day.

One woman in our program, an older woman, was caring for a child in his 20s or early 30s with cerebral palsy. This was very difficult for her because she really had no formal training and it was getting harder and harder. For this person, the shorter night classes that run for a longer period worked out very well.

Besides the courses for paid caregivers, which are offered five times a year, we have established a series of abbreviated weekend and evening sessions for family caregivers.

Some family members are skeptical about the need for training.

Absolutely!

How do you motivate them to participate in your program?

The nursing homes and local health care facilities are wonderful—they help pass information along about our program, and they tell people, “This is not easy, you are going to be taking on a lot.” They don’t necessarily believe it at first. They figure, “How hard can it be? I have raised children.” But now they are raising children and taking care of an elderly parent. And that’s a totally different world. So usually what ends up happening is that they find out just how hard it is. There are a few who have contacted us prior to the start of the class saying, “I just found out my father has Alzheimer’s—what do I do and can you help me?” We had one person whose grandfather had fallen and all of a sudden needed constant care, and she called one of the agencies that we had made a contact with. So sometimes it requires them to have to face it, stumble, realize this is not working and then they look for help.

That’s one of our biggest challenges. How do you get that word out? People don’t know who to call. We didn’t realize that until we started trying to make contact with agencies out there that there is no single, centralized place that you can call and ask for help.

You’ve partnered with other local agencies, correct?

Yes. One of the successes of our program has been building partnerships with several organizations devoted to serving the elderly. PathStone is certainly important for us, but we’ve also partnered with Good Will Industries to serve their constituents, and we’ve been talking to a local hospital and a nursing home about how our activities might help prevent re-institutionalization after discharge.

We’ve also worked with the Lackawanna County Area Agency on Aging to deliver the community education seminars for family caregivers—family and friends I should say. These seminars are quite popular.

It’s exciting to realize that there are so many agencies out there who are more than willing to work together. We had people coming to the table, people calling us when they heard about the [CTI] grant saying “How can we be a part of it?”

So your partnering activities have been one of your successes. What other successes have you enjoyed?

I am so gratified to see the difference our program is making in people’s lives. Family members and friends who now have a resource they can use, and helping people find jobs in this important field. I would add also that our four satellite centers, two of which are located in true rural communities, really help us reach people who otherwise would be left with very limited options.

Have you had any difficulties or challenges?

Through the course of our communication with community organizations, we found that no one agency had the capacity to assist us in finding families who could benefit from the training. To overcome this, we worked with several agencies and organizations. Although this approach helped us achieve our project goals, we—and the agencies we work with—recognized a need for a localized referral system to connect the disparate and varied services available.

Another challenge is getting family caregivers to ask for help. The director at our Area Agency on Aging, a truly wonderful woman and fount of information, told me that a lot of people have a stigma attached to calling her—they are afraid if they say they need help, that someone is going to come in and check on them and possibly take that family member out of the home, just because they asked for help and couldn’t do it alone. I was very surprised when she told me that.

Afterword

As the first two years of the Community College Caregiver Training Initiative have confirmed, community colleges such as Lackawanna College are well positioned to meet community needs, to develop partnerships that enhance sustainability, and to attract people into the caregiving field and to foster their professional development. These institutions hold great promise for the recruitment of people into the caregiving field, and for the training of both homecare workers and family caregivers. Continued expansion of caregiver training programs among community colleges will have a positive impact in communities throughout the country.

Future Caregiving Briefs will highlight other examples of programs developed under the CTI.

Kenneth A. Knapp, Ph.D. is senior research analyst at the ILC-USA and project manager of the Caregiving Project for Older Americans.

The Caregiving Project for Older Americans is an action-oriented collaboration that aims to improve the nation's caregiving workforce through training, the establishment of standards, and the creation of a career ladder. Bolstering support for family caregivers is another major goal of the project. A joint venture of the International Longevity Center-USA (ILC-USA) and the Schmieding Center for Senior Health & Education (SCSHE), the effort combines the talents of a policy research center with a clinical outpatient and health education program.

The Schmieding Center for Senior Health and Education of Northwest Arkansas, located in Springdale, Arkansas, provides older adults and their families with education, health care, information resources and other services for more positive aging. Education services include unique in-home caregiver training programs, public programs on positive aging, and professional programs to improve the geriatric expertise of health care professionals and students. Health care services include comprehensive clinical care and rehabilitation by an interdisciplinary team of geriatric professionals. The Schmieding Center is a partnership of the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences Donald W. Reynolds Institute on Aging, the Area Health Education Center-Northwest, and Northwest Health System.

The International Longevity Center-USA is a non-profit, non-partisan research, education, and policy organization whose mission is to help individuals and societies address longevity and population aging in positive and productive ways, and to highlight older peoples' productivity and contributions to their families and society as a whole. The organization is a part of a multinational research and education consortium, which includes centers in the United States, Japan, Great Britain, France, the Dominican Republic, India, South America, Argentina, the Netherlands and Israel. These centers work both autonomously and collaboratively to study how greater life expectancy and increased proportions of older people impact nations around the world.



ILC-USA is an affiliate of Mount Sinai School of Medicine.



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