

Planning Helps Long-Distance Caregivers Lend a Hand

Adult children frequently find that the stress of caregiving greatly increases when their parents live in a different geographic location. The National Alliance for Caregiving (NAC) estimates about seven million Americans care for a senior relative long distance. These caregivers spend an average of \$8,700 per year on support for their family member, which is nearly twice as much as those who live closer to their parents. Some of the additional cost is associated with travel, but these far away caregivers also incur extra expenses in hiring help and services for their parents. Good caretaking requires thoughtful strategy. This will hopefully reduce stress and provide a higher quality of caretaking.

First, you should assess your parents' needs to determine what gaps in their caretaking need addressing. Unmet needs are best discovered while observing your parents in their home. Look in the refrigerator to see if they are keeping fresh food available. Check to see if they have unopened bills that aren't being paid. See if your parents are still steady on their feet and whether they are mentally stable or easily confused.

If you see they need assistance, and assuming they're open to your help, you can begin to establish the support system they will need to continue living in their home. You can maintain contact with them by seeking help from neighbors, food providers and caregivers who can be your eyes and ears to help bridge the gap due to your living elsewhere. Additionally, you may want to establish a video chat service for them. Video visits can enable you to observe changes in condition such as weight loss or confusion. Software available through PointerWare and InTouchLink make it easy for use by seniors.

Ask your parents if you may accompany them on a trip to the doctor and ask them to execute HIPAA consent forms to allow you to access their medical records and information.

You may be able to arrange for groceries to be delivered, their house to be cleaned and the yard maintained. If it's time for someone to help your parents with their finances, you may want to suggest that your parents execute a durable financial power of attorney. This will allow you to establish online access to their accounts to help with bill paying. Shared online calendars are available through www.lotsahelpinghands.com, www.cozi.com and www.google.com/calendar.

If you still have gaps of help to fill, try checking with your local Area Agency on Aging. You should be able to receive information about meal programs, transportation and various social activities available in the area in which your parents live. If your parents require more help, then you may need to hire home health aides if medical monitoring is needed or personal care aides to help with light housekeeping, cooking and bathing.

Although your job helping may seem daunting, assessing the parents' needs and making a plan is the best way to start getting the matter under control. An experienced elder law attorney can help you make a plan and give you the types of referrals you will need.

By [Wesley E. Wright](#) and [Molly Dear Abshire](#), as published in the Houston Chronicle Senior Living Section on January 16, 2013.

