

How Do You Talk to Elderly Parents When They are No Longer Able to Take Care of Themselves?

By Wesley E. Wright and Molly Dear Abshire, as published in the Houston Chronicle Senior Living Section on June 22, 2008.

There are few people who would not want to stay in their own home until they died if they could. Unfortunately, it is not always possible. They may not have the family support to make it happen for various reasons. The adult children don't live nearby, or they're too busy with their own families, or perhaps they are even estranged from the parents.

Even if the children are in favor of helping the parents stay at home, they still may not be able to make it work. Staying at home can be expensive. While staying in a nursing home may cost \$4,500 a month, in-home care is much more expensive. In fact, it is not unusual for in-home care to cost as much as \$7,500 per month or more.

But what happens if the parent resists accepting help, either at home or elsewhere? Many elderly people are used to years of living alone and being independent. The thought of someone coming into their home and helping them would force them to lose some of that independence and privacy, which is loathsome to them in the extreme.

Mom may have difficulty walking or maybe she is eating less and less each day. She may begin neglecting to take baths and cannot recall what she had for her last meal. Then there is the clutter. Sometimes the elderly begin to hoard and stockpile things that most people would throw out. The trash that once made it out to the curb now becomes the home decor. Piles and piles of bank statements, letters, greeting cards, and newspapers are now kept in perpetuity.

It is a very good idea for adult children to start developing an open and ongoing discussion as soon as possible after seeing that things are beginning to decline. The parent doesn't seem to notice the changes as they developed over a long period of time. But the children notice and become understandably alarmed.

It is not uncommon for the parents to dismiss the observations of others as meaningless and intrusive. After all, the parents raised the kids. And in the eyes of many parents their kids never really grow up. The children and parents need to understand the potential significance of this matter.

Parents who fail to allow their children to have a voice and shut them out run the risk of drawing unwanted attention to their situation. If neighbors or others become aware that something is not quite right at the house of the parent, then there may be an unwanted intrusion by a referral to Adult Protection Services (APS) which may force the parent out of the house when the parent could have stayed if the child had been allowed to help.

Sometimes, someone will write a letter to the Harris County Probate Courts claiming that a person needs a guardian. If the parent thought the child was invading their privacy with suggestions of some care taking at the house, wait until the parent becomes subject to a court supervised guardianship

proceeding which is a matter of public record. Families working together should make a plan for the future.

And this is where the elder law attorney may help. Experienced elder law attorneys have had many experiences working with the elderly. They know the problems that seniors face, as well as the myriad of options that are available for tackling those problems.