

## Caregivers champion other caregivers in free “learning circles”

In Allegheny County, an estimated 145,000 older adults provide routine caregiving for a loved one or friend. Now those caregivers have a new outlet to turn to for support and resources that can help them better care for themselves and their loved ones, while minimizing emotional and physical stress.

Caregiver Champions is a new program designed to strengthen networks of informal caregivers for older adults by helping them reduce stress and gain access to important caregiving information and resources.

“So many local seniors have caregivers, and many of those caregivers spend every day feeling overwhelmed, exhausted, frustrated and burned out,” comments Nancy Zionts, chief program officer for the Jewish Healthcare Foundation, which oversees the initiative. “Their own lives have become secondary to the lives of the people they are caring for. Our goal is to help caregivers regain control and balance in their lives by learning how to navigate systems, advocate for their loved ones and access the resources they need when they need them.”

Caregiver Champions consists of six Caregiver Learning Circles, which are free two-hour discussions designed to provide information in a casual setting. Each learning circle features a topic expert who will provide useful tips and advice for caregivers.

“This isn’t a support group, nor is it a formal lecture,” explains project coordinator Beth Polonchak. “It’s an open, informal discussion where both the topic expert and the participants share ideas and thoughts. It’s about learning from one another and empowering one another with new knowledge and ideas.”

Learning circle topics include caregiver burnout, organization and home safety, communication, accessing local resources and advance planning. “The learning circles are so worthwhile,” says Nancy Spinello, who attended them in Monroeville. “Not only did I learn about an array of resources and coping skills, I also felt a kinship to the other



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*Monroeville Learning Circle participants discuss ways to stay organized and keep their homes safe.*

caregivers at the sessions. Only a caregiver knows what another caregiver is going through.”

To help promote that feeling of kinship among attendees, experienced caregivers are included in the program. “No two caregivers are alike,” Nancy says. “But every now and then you find a resilient caregiver who has a unique ability to overcome all the complex obstacles and thrive. We call these people Caregiver Champions and we’ve made them central to this program.”

Caregiver Champions host the learning circles and serve as resources of information and support for participants. “These champions have already overcome the challenges of caring for a loved one and they share a deep desire to share what they’ve learned with others,” Nancy says. “Our hope is that their experiences will educate and help our learning circle participants so that they too can one day become Caregiver Champions.” The program currently has eight champions and is actively looking to recruit more.

Caregiver Champions is funded in part by grants from the Jewish Healthcare Foundation, the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development and the Pennsylvania Department

of Public Welfare. Responding to the needs of caregivers is a key component of the Jewish Healthcare Foundation’s mission. “Serving the elderly and chronically ill has been at the core of our foundation’s work,” Nancy comments. “We have always been committed to developing a continuum of services that address the health-related needs of older adults. This is just one component of that vision.”

The program also provides learning circle attendees with reimbursement for respite services. “Spending an entire learning circle worrying about your loved one defeats the purpose of coming,” Beth says. “We wanted to make sure that caregivers could rest easy and leave their loved ones in trusted hands so that they could truly focus on their own well being.”

The first series of learning circles was held in Penn Hills back in March. Since then, they have been scheduled in Monroeville, Shaler, Upper St. Clair, Penn Hills and Oakmont. Caregivers can visit the Caregiver Champions website suggest a location for an upcoming learning circle. Pre-registration is required. For more information, visit [www.caregiver-champions.org](http://www.caregiver-champions.org), or contact Beth Polonchak at (412) 594-2569. **PSN**

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