

# ***QUEENS VOICE***

## **Near or Far, We Can All Care for Our Loved Ones** ***Tips and Advice for Long Distance Caregivers***



*By Jane Reilly, Clinical Case Manager, VNS Health Plans and Home Care Mar 28, 2024*

Growing up, I recall my parents caring for both sets of my grandparents, either in our home or in their homes nearby. It was always a good feeling, knowing we could be there for family—but caregiving, no matter where a loved one lives, isn't without its challenges. Not so long ago, generations of family might live in the same town, on the same block, even in the same house! But as technology and the economy transform the way we work and live, many families now find themselves living hours, if not days, apart from each other.

This distance can feel especially daunting when a loved one ages or becomes sick. Our first instinct is to be there by their side, but for those of us balancing work, kids, and the many other responsibilities we all carry, it isn't always possible to care for someone 24/7. That leaves many of us in the position of becoming a “long-distance caregiver,” someone who feels responsible for the care of a loved one and wants to stay tuned in, but is not able to be with them in person.

If you're in this position, you're not alone: 15% of all caregivers in the U.S. are long-distance, and that number is projected [to increase dramatically in coming years](#). And even if family does live close by, they may have issues visiting regularly in person due to their own mobility or health challenges. In these situations, it's common for people to feel guilty because they can't “do it all” for a loved one. But the fact is, we all need help sometimes—and that's especially true if you're trying to care for someone long

distance. When this is the case, figuring out what kind of help is right for your situation can be key to your loved one's health—and to your own peace of mind.

Often this can mean enlisting the services of a qualified home health care organization. As a Clinical Case Manager with VNS Health, I witness daily how overwhelming it can be for families trying to navigate the caregiving journey, from both near and far. That's why, when we first perform an assessment of a new patient in their home, one of the most important things we do is ask questions. What we're looking for is a clear and comprehensive picture of not only what the patient expects and requires, but also the caregiver's ability to support their loved one safely and on a consistent basis.

Especially when families live far away, having someone provide an in-home assessment can help reveal challenges that may not be obvious if families aren't with a loved one every day. For example, our team once went to meet a new patient who had serious vision issues and was living alone, far from family. We quickly realized that the home was in disarray and not conducive to getting around, and the patient didn't know how to ask his family for help.

With this knowledge in hand, we connected with the designated caregivers in the family to inform them of the problem, then worked together find a solution so this gentleman could live safely on his own. As a result, his family was able to rest easy, knowing there were people ready to support them and work with them to make their loved one's home safer.

At times, the daily physical distance between you and a loved one can feel frustrating—but there are ways you can be part of the care team, even from afar, and rest easier knowing that your family member is being cared for.

## **FINDING SOMEONE TO HELP COORDINATE EXTRA CARE**

If family members can't provide care in-person, there are many home care options that can help bridge those gaps. When it comes to home care, there's no one-size fits all approach. What you want is someone who listens to you and is responsive to your particular situation. An effective care plan often starts with a simple question—"What do you need?" We might ask a son or a daughter what they need most when caring for their homebound father, for example, while also asking the father what he wants and requires. This helps set expectations and enables our team to come up with a care plan that addresses the needs of everyone involved.

## **TRUST IS KEY**

Once a plan of care is in place, the next step is putting it into action. This involves more than just scheduling home care visits—it's also about the relationship of your loved one and you are building the home care team, your loved one and you. Having someone new come into your home can feel intimidating, which is why home care workers first focus on building trust with those they care for. One of my colleagues, Lovern Denny Devarel, has worked as a home health aide for decades, and knows firsthand how important those first visits are.

"When you come in, it's really important to explain to the family what the plan of care is and make sure we're all on the same page," she says. Lovern notes that one of her first priorities when meeting a new patient is building trust, and making sure they know that she is there to listen and support them. "Every

day, I work to remind people that I'm there to help, to care, and that we are in this together." says Lovern.

### **BE OPEN TO SUGGESTIONS FROM YOUR LOVED ONE'S CARE TEAM**

A care team can supply context that a family might miss when they don't live in the same community. For example, clinicians might realize that a patient has close ties to a local church or community group, and can encourage them to reconnect. A care team is also likely to be knowledgeable about community resources, like free friendly visits/phone calls or social events designed specifically for older adults.

### **COMMUNICATE**

It's important that family caregivers feel comfortable reaching out to the home care team on a regular basis to inquire about how their loved one is doing. Knowing how to ask for information helps ease frustration for the family, and as a result, means everyone can avoid misinformation. The home care team should also educate you and other family members about HIPAA regulations, since there are rules the care team needs to follow when it comes to protecting a patient's medical information.

### **DELEGATE!**

It's critically important to know who is responsible for various responsibilities within a family. This might mean designating one person as a healthcare proxy, then designating another family member to help with communicating to the rest of the family and another to manage finances or be the power of attorney. Family caregivers can often feel they must carry the world on their shoulders, and that can take a serious toll on their well-being. Sharing care duties is one simple way to alleviate the stress of juggling responsibilities.

### **STAY CONNECTED**

Just because a loved one isn't nearby doesn't mean you can't have quality time together. For example, my sibling and I started a tradition where I created simple and fun workouts we could do together on the phone while sitting. This encourages us both to move, and at the same time provides a check in on family in a way that feels natural and enjoyable.

There are lots of activities that can be done from afar, especially with the help of a video or phone call. For example, having a non-alcoholic "cocktail" hour together is a terrific way to stay connected and hydrated. Or try watching a funny movie together over video, which can also help build lung strength when you find yourself both laughing. With a little creativity, you can help support the health of a loved one, check in on them, and get to have fun—all at the same time!

### **SCHEDULING TIPS**

For many homebound patients, their home health aides and clinicians may be the people they spend the most time with in person from week to week. As a result, the care team is intimately familiar with their patient's schedules and needs. Lovern suggests that it can be useful to talk first with a patient's home health aide and get their recommendations on the best times to schedule calls or visits. Lovern also notes that having a dedicated time of day for phone calls gives people something to look forward to and helps them feel less isolated.

The bottom line: Whether your loved one needs short-term care as they recover from an illness or injury, or more long-term home care, there are many ways for you to be there for them, no matter where you are!



*Jane Reilly, Clinical Case Manager, VNS Health Plans and Home Care*

To learn more about Home Care at VNS Health, including tips and advice for caregivers visit:  
<https://www.vnshealth.org/home-care>

***Queens Voice is the true voice of Queens, covering local news, events and health tips. This article also ran in the online and print versions of Your Health Voice, Bronx Voice and Manhattan Voice for a total print circulation of 40,000 and 47,520 unique visitors per month.***