

Caregivers Unite

Organize a caregiving team to optimize support

By Laurie Wertich

When cancer strikes, everyone wants to help but no one seems to know where to start. The common refrain is: *Let me know if there is anything I can do*. Friends utter these heartfelt words because they truly want to help—and with a little bit of leadership and organization, they can.

Caregiving is a community job. Sure, most people likely have a primary caregiver at home who provides the lion's share of support—but the primary caregiver's priority concern is the well-being of the patient and the family. He or she may be juggling work, children, medical appointments, and all of the physical and emotional challenges that come with a cancer diagnosis. But what about all that other stuff—like meals, grocery shopping, yard work, carpools, laundry, and so much more? This is where the community caregiving team comes in. Many hands really do make for light work.

Want to organize a stellar team of supporters? Here's how:

1. Appoint a Coordinator:

The first step to organizing a support team is to appoint a coordinator. The coordinator should be an organizational whiz who can serve as the liaison between the family in need and the extended network of supporting caregivers. Cancer patients and their families do not have the time or the energy to assign tasks. That's what the coordinator is for.

2. Assess Needs:

The caregiving coordinator can gently interview the patient and extended family to determine what their needs are. Get specific. Do they need meals, rides to treatment, lawn-mowing? Do they have dietary restrictions? Get a clear picture of the needs and how best to fulfill them.

3. Gather Support

Develop a master list of all community members who have volunteered to help. Include contact information as well as details about which services each person can provide.

4. Devise a System

Anyone who has tried to organize meal drop-offs knows how challenging it can be to coordinate a lot of different schedules and needs. Now, with a few clicks of a button, friends and family can sign up to help patients and their families with a variety of tasks. That's right—caregiving has gone digital.

There are several online resources that allow you to create a schedule for organizing support:

- **LotsaHelpingHands.com** allows you to create a customized calendar for scheduling tasks.
- **MyLifeline.org** provides cancer patients with a free website with several unique features, including a helping calendar.
- **CareCalendar.org** is an online system for organizing meals and other help for families during a time of illness or life changing event.

These online programs simplify the process of coordinating volunteers and prevent the endless stream of emails in the inbox, as well as miscommunications and scheduling snafus. But, even if you don't want to use one of these systems, caregiving in the digital era can be a breeze with simple tools such as spreadsheets or Google calendars.

The key to a successful caregiving team is organization, whether you go digital or use the old standby—pen and paper. So designate a coordinator, maintain a master list of helpers, and get busy helping. With a solid system, community caregiving can be simple. Instead of saying “Let me know if I can do anything to help,” volunteers will be saying, “Where can I sign up to help?”