

# Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

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WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 2016

VOL. 89, NO. 208, 2/24/16

FINAL

## Caregivers for mentally ill need help, study finds

By Joe Smydo  
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Parents and others caring for loved ones with mental illness endanger their own health as they labor, often for years at a time with little support, to navigate an unfriendly treatment system, an advocacy group said Tuesday in a report recommending more assistance for affected families.

The report by the National Alliance for Caregiving said at least 8.4 million Americans care for an adult family member with an emotional or mental health issue. On average, they provide 32 hours of care a week, have done so for about nine years and, despite their advancing age, have made no long-term plans for their financially dependent loved ones. Many feel socially isolated. Only 35 percent of the 1,601 caregivers surveyed said they have other relatives or friends to help.

## Study: Caregivers need help

**CARE**, FROM A-1

The report said family members struggle to find an accurate diagnosis and the right medications and to get loved ones to follow treatment regimens. They also struggle to find the appropriate doctors and outpatient services, to get health care professionals to consult with them and to obtain adequate insurance coverage for care.

Carol Reynolds, 73, of Penn Hills, recalled the "what in the world?" feeling she had when her son, now 43 and diagnosed with schizophrenia, began manifesting symptoms of mental illness in adolescence. An "uphill battle" — including a search for a doctor and an encounter requiring police assistance — followed. "The first four or five years, getting him settled, getting him calmed down, getting him the medicine he should have, it was hard," said Mrs. Reynolds, who shares caregiving responsibilities with her husband, Harold.

It all takes a toil, according to the report. Nearly

three-quarters of those surveyed reported high levels of stress, while only a third rated their health as excellent and half attributed health problems to their care-giving responsibilities.

Asked which types of support they most needed, most caregivers ranked better insurance coverage first, followed by assistance in navigating the treatment system and education about mental health issues. "Mental illness is a condition that affects the whole family," Gail Gibson Hunt, president and CEO of the alliance, said in announcing the study.

Kenneth S. Thompson, a psychiatrist at Wilkensburg-based Milestone Centers Inc. and president of the Pittsburgh Psychiatric Society, said deinstitutionalization has enabled states to save money on hospital beds and people with mental illness to lead more inclusive lives in their communities. While the shift also has meant more responsibility for the family members of people with mental illness, Dr. Thompson said, family sup-

ports haven't kept pace with the need. "We have not done a whole lot to help caregivers," he said. Echoing a concern raised in the study, he said the federal privacy law, the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, can prevent clinicians from discussing patients' treatment with those caring for them.

Mrs. Reynolds, who has three other children, said she has not experienced isolation, insurance problems or health issues related to care-giving. "We're happy," she said, attributing her son's stability to a Milestone day program.

But she said she is concerned about what will happen when she and her husband are unable to care for

him at home. "As for a long-term plan, I don't have any."

Dr. Thompson said he's familiar with many of the issues cited in the study, including the difficult search for a treatment program and understanding the limits of treatment. "There are no cures, let's put it that way."

Milestone and similar organizations offer Mental Health First Aid Training to acquaint family members and others with mental illness. Milestone will offer two versions of the course, one focusing on older adults and one on youths, in May at Community College of Allegheny County's Boyce Campus.

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