

# THE TENNESSEAN

Nashville Eye

## The elderly care gap

Meeting the non-medical needs of our senior citizens is a problem begging for creative solution

By Becci Bookner

I'm still a number of years away from classification as a senior citizen, but I am increasingly concerned about a gap that exists in the elaborate network of elderly care programs and services.



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Something important is missing. I know because I've personally struggled to find the missing piece.

In 1990, two of my elderly aunts required companionship as well as regular supervision of their daily health and financial needs. Other family members and I faced the dilemma of trying to maintain a professional career, care for our immediate families and meet the varied, constant needs of our aunts.

We learned first-hand about the complexity of locating qualified, dependable caregivers, coordinating schedules and planning for the emergencies that always arise. We were poorly equipped pioneers exploring a new, uncharted world — a world full of demanding challenges day after day.

Millions of individuals and families face the same daily challenges. While there are a variety of ways to receive health care services in our country, there is not an organized, reliable way to receive companionship, household management, transportation and other services that are so often urgently needed by the elderly or the temporarily dependent.

There is a personal crisis ahead for millions of Americans and a social crisis ahead for our nation. Only 5% of people over 65 are in nursing homes; the others live in their own homes and in the homes of family members.

Twenty-five percent of workers in America over age 30 already have some caregiving responsibilities for older adults; about 40% of the work force expects to be in this position within the next five years. Because of my own experience, I know these statistics translate into lost time at work, personal health problems, family stress, financial demands, and tre-

Elderly care issues are already affecting the American workplace in significant ways. As reported in the June 1995 issue of *American Woman*, a study by the Families and Work Institute revealed that of 305 workers surveyed, 25% had changed jobs because of their elderly care responsibilities. In addition, 39% of the caregivers reported being distracted at work, 22% had considered quitting, and 14% had stopped working to meet their responsibilities.

As our population ages, the economic impact of elderly care on business will be even more dramatic.

I have been a caregiver; I may someday be a care-receiver. But on whichever side of this problem I stand, I know it is important to start finding solutions. Now is the time to:

- Discuss the gaps in provision of non-medical services that exist under our present network of care delivery.
- Debate the ways in which existing resources can be re-directed to provide more services and care to the elderly in non-institutional settings and non-traditional ways.
- Act to encourage development and delivery of new non-medical, in-home support services to America's elderly and their families.

An appropriate and effective first action would be to design tax incentives that encourage enterprising people to respond with new ideas and new approaches to this growing problem. Changes in the format of insurance policies to allow services in the home by non-medical personnel under prescribed circumstances could ultimately produce savings for insurance companies and tax payers as well as dramatically enhance the quality of life for our seniors.

America is a creative and energetic country that finds solutions. The exciting developments in the health care delivery system throughout the past 25 years have proven this. Now let's turn some of that creativity and energy to providing top quality, non-medical support services which will close the senior care gap. ■