Creating a National Policy on Long-Term Care

By Val J. Halamandaris

There are two statistics which, taken together, make a compelling case for the need to create a national policy on long term care. The first is that 10 percent of the American public, all of whom have a multiplicity of chronic diseases, account for 82 percent of all U.S. healthcare costs. The second statistic is that the 78 million member baby boom generation is growing rapidly. Each day, ten thousand of them reach their 65th birthday. Increasingly, what they need is help to remain independent in their own homes and manage their chronic problems which increase with age. In short, the U.S. healthcare system, which is primarily focused on acute disease, is out of sync with what is needed. This is quickly becoming a crisis which requires bold action. Following are my suggestions based on my many years of experience.

Encourage wellness. Our life is a gift from GOD and what we do with it is our gift back to GOD. We have a duty, both to our family and our country, to take care of ourselves in order that we can be healthy and give back to society by helping those who are less fortunate than we.

Encourage independence. Help elderly and vulnerable persons to achieve the optimal quality of health, thus preventing or postponing disabilities that can become intractable problems. We must do everything possible to assist our senior and disabled populations in remaining safe and independent.

Encourage families to shoulder the caregiver burden. Most families want very much to care for their elderly loved ones; every reasonable step should be taken to help them do so. Families are the first line of responsibility. We must provide caregivers with respite help and other resources in order that they may continue to meet this obligation. We must be careful not to substitute paid care for family assistance without a compelling reason.

Encourage technology and other assistance. When wellness and prevention fail to keep seniors independent, we should provide assistance both in the form of technology and help from paid caregivers. Together, these supports can compensate for any disabilities that may have been manifested.

Encourage a policy that does everything possible to help seniors remain at home. They prefer to be in the home setting, where they can thrive among their family and loved ones. They should only be uprooted to an institution when there is an unmistakable need.

Encourage careful, compassionate care to those who are so sick they cannot leave home without assistance. This fragile population, the sickest of the sick, requires our special attention to enjoy the best of health and the highest quality of life.
Encourage the use of interdisciplinary teams. Physicians, nurses, counselors, ministers of religion, family members, and the patient themselves must work together to make the complicated decisions about appropriate care.

Encourage patients to receive holistic care. Long-term care must address not only the physical but also the financial, emotional, and spiritual needs of chronically ill seniors and disabled persons.

Encourage the creation of a policy defining long-term care by disability and not age. Children born with congenital issues and those of middle age who have similar problems or who are victims of accidents have an equally urgent need for long-term care, as do seniors who suffer from multiple disabilities.

Ensure that vulnerable populations are treated with respect. They should have every opportunity to exercise the full measure of the freedoms guaranteed to all Americans by the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

Encourage the creation of a universally supported plan. Employers, individuals, and the public sector must all contribute. The problem of long-term care is too massive to be solved without full participation from every part of society.

Encourage the participation of volunteers. Because the problem is so large, it cannot be addressed even with the full participation of families, employers, and government. What is needed is a cadre of volunteers, particularly able-bodied members of the baby boom generation, who will be called to serve by caring for their less fortunate peers. President John F. Kennedy’s clarion call “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country” will become far more meaningful for the baby boomers in coming years than it was the first time they heard it from President Kennedy at his inauguration in January 1961.

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