

SOMERVILLE  
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# Advocate



## Six Tips for Defusing Family Disagreements About Care

By Carolynn Nagao-Marcotte

Differences of opinion often come with the territory when dealing with relatives. But family disagreements about care can be a huge problem when there’s a crisis and a loved one’s best interests are at stake.

Unfortunately, this is a fairly common situation. But a bit of preparation and a collaborative approach can make a world of difference.

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Somerville  Cambridge  
**Elder Services**

# Six Tips for Defusing Family Disagreements

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I recently worked with a woman in her early 90s, who was living at home and maintaining an active social life. But her husband had died a few years before and her children worried about her living alone.

**It's natural to have strong feelings about the health and well-being of a loved one, but it's also vital to respect that person's autonomy and wishes.**

Some of the children wanted her to move into assisted living. Others wanted her to receive in-home services. They couldn't agree on what was best. Meanwhile the mother was happy living at home and didn't feel that she needed any help.

It was a complicated situation that was starting to take a toll on their relationships. But working together—with an Aging Life Care Manager—the

# About Care

family eventually reached consensus on a plan that addressed the most pressing needs—and everyone is much happier.

It wasn't quick or easy, but here are a few strategies for navigating this kind of family disagreement about care:

## Start With What the Elder Wants

Overlooking this is a common mistake, especially when there's a crisis. It's natural to have strong feelings about the health and well-being of a loved one, but it's also vital to respect that person's autonomy and wishes.

Asking for help isn't easy and it's fairly common for people to initially refuse in-home assistance, even if they need it. Talk about it, and really listen. Remember that you're both on the same side, and that trying to force somebody into a situation they don't want often creates more problems than it solves.

## Plan Ahead

Discussing the elder's wishes in advance is crucial, and it's just as important to record those wishes and designate a trusted Power of Attorney and Health Care Proxy to ensure those decisions are carried out. Programs such as Honoring Choices or tools such as 5 Wishes can be very helpful here.

People often procrastinate, but a bit of preparation here can make all the difference. Instead of being divided by perceptions of what the elder may have wanted, the family can unite to carry out that person's wishes.

## Respect all opinions

When there's a crisis and it's not clear what the elder wants, there are often conflicting ideas on what to do next. This can create a potentially explosive situation.

Talking things out is a good way to defuse things, but only if there's trust that everyone's opinions will be respected. Identifying the concerns and goals of each family member is often a crucial first step toward finding consensus. And keeping everyone in the loop can go a long way toward warding off resentment.

## Identify Shared Goals

Every family has history, and it's easy for that to bubble up during crises. Focusing on shared goals can help keep the conversation positive and minimize the chance of revisiting old conflicts.

## Keep an Open Mind

Family members often disagree on the best course of action and become attached to just one solution, when it's possible that alternative measures could deliver better outcomes. It's best to keep an open mind while exploring options.

## Hire a Professional

An Aging Life Care Manager (ALCM) can help families reach consensus on health decisions in several ways. A good ALCM should be deft at facilitating family discussions, while also providing expertise on assessing the elder's needs, delineating their options, and recording advance directives.

Whatever course of action you take, it's important to have realistic expectations, and understand it's entirely possible your loved one isn't going to want drastic changes over the short term. A more productive

tack is to identify the highest priority needs and try to address those first, with the hope of opening up an ongoing discussion about what's best for the future.

In the case of the family I discussed earlier, it turns out they weren't really aware of the services that could help their mother stay at home safely. Once we discussed their options, they regrouped and decided to work together on a plan that would address their concerns and keep their mother happy in her own home.

And at the end of the day, isn't that what it's all about?

**Carolynn  
Nagao-Marcotte**



Carolynn Nagao-Marcotte is a dementia-certified Aging Life Care Manager (ALCM) for the CLO program at Somerville Cambridge Elder Services. For more information, or to set up a free consultation, call:

**617-756-1026**

# Savvy Caregiver

## Provides Key Dementia Care Training

When a person is diagnosed with dementia, it is often family members and friends who assume major caregiving responsibilities. While this support from relatives is invaluable, it's often their first time in a caregiving role.

The Savvy Caregiver Program provides dementia care training to help ease that learning curve, and it's available to caregivers through Somerville-Cambridge Elder Services (SCES) this winter.

SCES Savvy Caregiver facilitator Nathaniel Meyer said the focus is on building caregiver confidence through practical teaching about dementia and strategies for managing daily life.

"The Savvy Caregiver Program describes caregiving as 'an unexpected career,'" said Meyer. "Dementia caregiving presents unique and unexpected challenges. This program



Social Workers Liz Aguilo and Nathaniel Meyer will offer dementia care training through a free Savvy Caregiver program that starts in February. SCES PHOTO

helps caregivers develop and integrate knowledge, skills, and supportive practices."

The 12-hour training program is designed for caregivers with no formal training. The classes are spread out over three to six weeks, focusing on impacts of dementia, as well as the skills needed to care for someone diagnosed with the disease. Meyer said that preparation is important, noting an Emory University study that found Savvy Caregiver to be effective at reducing caregiver stress.

"Caregivers' wellbeing also improves when they have a better idea what to expect, how to respond, and what issues are beyond their control," said Meyer.

Meyer is a licensed clinical Social Worker with the SCES Adult Family Care program. He facilitates the trainings alongside Paine Senior Services

Executive Director Liz Aguilo, who is also a clinical social worker and SCES board Vice President.

Rosa joined the first SCES Savvy Caregiver class in October, after nearly a year of providing care for her mother. She described the class as educational, interesting, and useful.

"It came at an opportune moment for me, when I was becoming stressed and anxious," she said. "It's helped me understand what's happening with my mom, and it's helped me to cope better. You also get to listen to other people's stories, which helps you put your own situation in perspective."

The free classes are open to a limited number of participants. Subsidized respite options are also available to some caregivers. Call Age Info at 617-628-2601 for more information.



Funding for this program was provided by a grant from the Administration for Community Living, in collaboration with the Massachusetts Executive Office of Elder Affairs.

Paine Senior Services is a Cambridge-based organization that helps older adults remain independent in the community.

# Hollings Hired as New SCES Executive Director

Longtime senior living and health care leader Paul Hollings has been hired as the new Executive Director of Somerville-Cambridge Elder Services (SCES).

**Paul has built his career on person-centered care and has a deep commitment to service...**

Hollings succeeded John O'Neill, who retired in October after 38 years as Executive Director at SCES.

Hollings comes to SCES after serving as Executive Director of Mary Immaculate Nursing/Restorative Center, a 231-bed skilled nursing facility in Lawrence, MA. His resume features more than 30 years of leadership experience with organizations that serve older adults, including serving as Executive Director of Orchard Cove, a continuing care retirement facility within the Hebrew SeniorLife group of facilities and programs. He was also Executive Director of Neville Center at Fresh Pond, a non-profit skilled nursing facility in Cambridge, where he led a transformation of the community and championed resident-directed care.



SCES Board President Elizabeth Aguilo cited that track record as a key factor in the hiring process, adding she's delighted he's come aboard.

"Paul has built his career on person-centered care and has a deep commitment to service," said Aguilo. "He's skilled at including all key stakeholders to create alignment with mission, values, and strategy."

Hollings holds a Masters in Health Services Administration from George Washington University, and a BA in Political Science from Haverford College. He also served on the board of LeadingAge Massachusetts,

a state association that represents not-for-profit providers of housing and services for older adults.

"I am confident that under his leadership, SCES will both continue the work so ably begun by John O'Neill and develop new and broader approaches to serve the seniors in our communities," said Aguilo.

Aguilo also thanked O'Neill for his many years of service at the agency.

"He cares deeply about people aging with dignity, at home," she added. "I wish him well on this next chapter of his life."

# When Donna Met Helen

Recently divorced- with two young children- Donna was going through a difficult period when she decided to become a caregiver with Adult Family Care (AFC) in 1998.

Looking back on that decision to

open her home to Helen, a women with developmental disabilities, Donna said it's been life-changing for both of them. Nearly 20 years later, they're still going strong.

"I've been very lucky," said Donna. "Helen helped me get through a difficult part of my life. I love her."

Donna and Helen were a caregiver match through AFC, which helps people receive the care they need at home through caregiver training and compensation. The program primarily helps

family caregivers succeed, but it also matches compassionate people who can open their homes with others who want to live in the community.

In this case, Helen wanted to relocate to a home setting. Her siblings connected with Donna, who owns a 5-bedroom home and had worked

**Donna provides care and mentoring, in addition to a safe and comfortable living situation, and has worked to help Helen feel a part of the family.**

# A Caregiver Match Success Story



Donna and Helen met as a caregiver match through the Adult Family Care program in 1998 and they've been together ever since. COURTESY PHOTO

with people with developmental disabilities for years. Helen's family then contacted AFC, which followed up with a rigorous screening process to ensure they were a good match.

As a caregiver through AFC, Donna receives a monthly stipend, as well as support and training from a social worker and nurse. AFC director Jeanne Leyden says they check in monthly, to confirm things are going well and to offer support.

"This work can be overwhelming at times!" said Leyden. "So the support and stability from our social workers and nurses has been a tremendous help to Donna over the years."

AFC is a MassHealth-funded program, which is provided at no cost

to eligible participants. In order to receive help through AFC, the person receiving care must require assistance with daily living activities, such as ambulating, dressing or eating.

Donna provides care and mentoring, in addition to a safe and comfortable living situation, and has worked to help Helen feel a part of the family; Helen knows that she always has an open invitation to whatever Donna is doing. But they also maintain their separate lives and routines. Donna has a job in addition to providing care for Helen, and Helen has attended the same adult day health program for years.

Leyden said it takes a lot of work to make a match sustainable, and she

credited Donna and Helen for continually putting in the effort.

"When you have a match, there are always certain challenges," said Leyden. "Donna and Helen are always willing to work out any issues."

Donna confirmed that caring for someone in your own home isn't always easy, and described AFC as a crucial part of a support system that includes Helen's sisters.

"She has an amazing family," said Donna. "Her sisters are great advocates. And AFC is always there if I need them."



Adult Family Care (AFC) is a non-profit program through Somerville-Cambridge Elder Services that provides caregiver support and training for eligible participants across the Greater Boston, North Shore, and Merrimack Valley areas. For more information, visit [adultfamilycare.org](http://adultfamilycare.org) or call:

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For on-line donations visit:  
[www.eldercare.org](http://www.eldercare.org)

## SCES on the World Wide Web

SCES's web site continues to be a resource for older people, caregivers, and professionals. Located at [www.eldercare.org](http://www.eldercare.org), the site contains information about SCES programs and services, as well as a variety of links to other web sites featuring resources for elders and caregivers. Visitors can access the latest advocacy bulletins highlighting legislation and budget issues impacting elders. They can also browse a directory of health fact sheets.

## Free Elder Care Advice Consultation

Struggling with issues related to aging or caregiving? SCES offers a free consultation with an Elder Care Advisor who can provide information, advice and education to older people, their partners, families, and caregivers. Elder Care Advisors offer in-home, in-office or phone consultations to residents of Cambridge and Somerville or to individuals caring for an older person who lives in either of the two communities. Services include: information about community resources; advice about care options; assistance with planning for care; education about issues of aging and connections to a wide range of community services including those services offered by Somerville-Cambridge Elder Services.

### For more information:

**Call The Aging Information Center at 617-628-2601**

## Questions, Comments, or Suggestions

Contact the editor, email [info@eldercare.org](mailto:info@eldercare.org) or call 617-628-2601