

Listening to our Elders

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As part of the Senior Agenda Coalition's ongoing outreach efforts, recently I met with fifteen seniors from the Newport area. Slightly more than half of the folks around the table were residents of Donovan Manor, the senior residence where we met. The others came from around the city. The meeting's purposes was to share our stories about aging in the community---what worked well, what didn't.

I led off with a story of how respite care had saved the life of a friend who was a long-term caregiver for his ill spouse. Several people had caregiving stories to tell. One knew someone who waited too long to seek respite care to ease her caregiving burden, and she ended up dying before the person she was caring for. Another's caregiving for her aging mother eventually required her to quit her job to devote full time to the task. I explained that respite care was a service that provides trained support persons who fill in for caregivers and give them relief from the stress of caregiving. Many weren't aware that it was available. There were positive stories as well, such as how family members banded together to help their mother to remain in her own home until she passed away at age 96.

Some had lessons about medical care. One person urged us, "don't fall in love with your primary care doctor if he or she cannot diagnose your problem." She eventually sought out a specialist, whom she credited with helping her survive cancer. A polio victim as a child said she couldn't find a doctor with experience treating the results of that disease. Another said that during his wife's chronic illness, if she could have accessed a nurse practitioner instead of waiting around a hospital emergency department for a doctor, she might have fared better.

Many of the Donovan Manor residents praised the building's supportive environment. They said residents looked out for and cared about each other. One person had formerly lived in a townhouse duplex where she felt isolated and alone. Since moving to the Donovan Manor community she was much happier because she made friends and became involved in activities. Several of us expressed that this was the kind of place where we would like to live as we aged. I

have held these meetings at many other senior buildings, and unfortunately this sense of a caring community wasn't always the norm.

I started the meeting by framing it this way: "This is not just a 'gripe session'. We want to hear the good as well as the bad. It's particularly important to know what's working well so that we can advocate for funding for such activities." I believe by truly listening to each other (not always an easy thing to do), we can learn what's needed to age in the community. At the Senior Agenda Coalition we invite our elected officials to join these conversations, and to listen more than they talk. Those who attend often become more supportive of programs and services for seniors.