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Arizona Takes National Leadership Role in Family Caregiving

Arizona is set to become a member of an elite group of states, along with Oklahoma, Nebraska, Oregon and Wisconsin, to provide respite care to family caregivers. With strong bipartisan support the Arizona Legislature has passed HB 2789, which includes the Lifespan Respite Care Program. This legislation, awaiting the Governor's signature, sets a new course for assisting the growing number of family caregivers in the state.

"This legislation makes Arizona one of only five states in the country with a formalized respite care program," said Bonnie Danowski, Executive Team member of Valley Interfaith Project (VIP), which conceived and advocated strongly for the bill. "Our state has recognized that respite care is not a luxury but an absolute necessity. Without relief from caregiving duties, family caregivers frequently become ill themselves, which results in two ill people, and no one to care for either person."

VIP, a broad-based organization made up of religious congregations, schools, and other associations, recognized the "impending tsunami" six years ago when members began to talk about the crushing need for a well trained and adequate caregiving workforce.

Through thousands of meetings, emails and phone calls to educate state agency heads and staff, businesses, community colleges, long term care providers, elected officials from cities, counties, the state legislature and the governor's office, it became clear that Arizona needed to address some of the long term care industry's problems. This past September, VIP asked Senator Carolyn Allen (R-Dist. 8) to sponsor legislation to address one component of the problem, that of respite care.

The legislation appropriates \$500,000 towards respite care for Arizona families who do not qualify for any other assistance in their caregiving duties. Respite care provides family caregivers a much-needed break from their responsibilities and is frequently the #1 requested need in caregiving families.

"This will benefit primary caregivers, usually a wife, who just needs to take time for herself, to get away to the market for a couple of hours or take a break for a day or two," said Danowski, who has been a caregiver herself for 36 years. "Senator Allen was instrumental in leading this course to support Arizona families."

Family caregivers provide the majority of all caregiving for children and adults with mental and physical disabilities and frail elders. In fact, 546,456 caregivers (1 in 10) in the State of Arizona provide 5.85 million hours of care per year at a value of \$5.8 billion. Each of these caregivers spends at least 20 hours/week caring for their loved one.

“Family caregivers are the backbone of the Long Term Care industry, providing 80% of all caregiving. We must protect their health. We want to recognize the State Senate and House for their leadership in this issue. This will provide a break for Arizona’s caregiving families ” said Dick White, VIP President. The trend from institutionalized living, i.e., nursing homes and assisted living facilities, to remaining in one’s own home has accelerated. This results in the need for more workers who can come into people’s homes and provide the care needed. This kind of care covers a wide range, all the way from cleaning and cooking to personal hygiene needs to full skilled nursing care. The majority of that care falls on a family member or close friend who is not paid. Respite care often makes the difference between keeping loved ones at home and having to place them in an institution.

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