

# The Sentinel

## **Elder Care: Independence versus Interdependence**

Karen Kaslow | July 3, 2015 | The Sentinel

Independence, or the “freedom from outside control or support,” is one of the fundamental principles upon which our nation was founded.

Independence continues to be a core value in American culture today, and thoughts of shared decision-making or recommendations of assistance/support from others can send some folks into a tailspin. They will do almost anything to avoid being “dependent” on others. A prime example is a person who refuses to stop driving despite warning signs that his/her ability to safely operate a vehicle is compromised.

Over the years, the general mindset of older adults, their families and professionals who work with this population has been that the preservation of independence is an important goal for which to strive. I recently heard a presentation that has caused me to rethink this concept.

Ken Dychtwald, gerontologist, psychologist, author and founder/CEO of Age Wave (a company that conducts research and provides consulting services regarding aging issues to businesses and nonprofits worldwide), suggested that interdependence, not independence, should be the focus of society’s efforts to meet the needs of an aging population.

What is meant by interdependence? I believe that two essential components of interdependence are a willingness to admit when assistance is necessary or would be beneficial, as well as a willingness to provide assistance to others within the scope of one’s abilities.

Take for example a dog owner who develops difficulty walking. What is the first solution that comes to mind when the owner can no longer walk the dog and there are no family members living close enough to help? Hire a pet service? Get rid of the dog?

If the concept of interdependence is considered, a preteen could be engaged to walk the dog, and perhaps the owner could provide some help with homework or be an after-school contact if the preteen’s parents work.

This concept is developing into a reality nationwide in several forms. One type is co-housing developments—projects that include a cluster of privately-owned homes or rental units with jointly owned property and a common house. Residents work together to care for both the property and each other.

Some co-housing developments may be specifically designed for older adults; however, they are different from retirement communities because the residents are the owners and remain responsible for all decisions and actions within the development. Other developments are intergenerational, and residents of all ages become an extended family. For those residents who develop extensive care needs, the assistance of community members can supplement hired help

and allow these individuals to remain in their homes and continue to participate in community life.

Another form of interdependent living is village networks. Participants who live in a general geographic area pay a membership fee to belong to a “village” or organization that provides social opportunities and helps connect members with needed services such as transportation and home repair. These services may be provided by volunteers or hired professionals.

Examples of villages in our area include the Messiah Lifeways Connections Program (Mechanicsburg), the Lancaster Downtowners, and the Support Network at Penn National (Fayetteville, Franklin County).

Projections released by the U.S. Census Bureau in 2012 predict dramatic increases in the number of older Americans. Those over age 65 will grow in number from 43.1 million to 92.0 million by 2060, meaning that just over one of every five U.S. residents will be a “senior citizen.”

Of this group, currently 5.9 million people are age 85 and older. By 2060, this number will more than triple, reaching 18.2 million.

Can you imagine our current policies and systems trying to support this many people? Factor in that currently, the majority of long-term care provided in the home in our country is by unpaid family caregivers, whose numbers are projected to decrease from more than seven potential caregivers for every family member age 80 or older in 2010 to only four per family member in 2030 (AARP Bulletin, April 2015). Seniors of the future will face an extreme erosion of the available pool of family members who could serve as caregivers.

The above examples of interdependent communities are responses to our society’s growing need to find new and creative ways to serve our older citizens. The benefits of interdependence can be financial, social, physical and emotional. In our society, to graciously accept assistance is probably more difficult for most people than to provide assistance to others. Instead of independence at any cost, learning to ask for and accept assistance can help us lead happier and healthier lives, no matter what our age.

Keystone Elder Law is offering free seminars on long-term care planning on Thursday, July 9 at the Hampton Inn in Mechanicsburg. Multiple sessions are available. Please call 717-697-3223 for details.

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