



THIS STORY HAS BEEN FORMATTED FOR EASY PRINTING

The Web gives boomer caregivers a boost Sites help them manage meds, schedules, family reminders

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By Susan Chaityn Lebovits, Globe Correspondent | February 25, 2008

When Steven Dworkin's father was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in 2005, he and his two siblings began to share in his care. But Dworkin was in Newton, his parents lived in Florida, and his brother and sister were in Connecticut.

"My dad passed away relatively quickly," Dworkin said. "And then we were completely unprepared to care for our mother."

At the time, Dworkin's business partner, Jonathan Quint, saw the challenges his wife was having caring for her mother, and the two knew they'd hit on a much-needed service: helping baby boomers care for aging parents.

They came up with Caregiver Helper (caregiverhelper.com), a secure online community resource that houses information about medications being taken, emergency contacts, doctor's appointments, and even the patient's favorite activities.

"Anytime a new caregiver came to my mother's house, all of the information was available, including her favorite meals and television shows," Dworkin said. "And each time there was a new doctor, all of her medications could be printed out."

Brookline resident Susan Goldberg and her two siblings, who live in Chelsea, care for their 95-year-old mother, Pearle Goldberg, in Newton. She recently broke her shoulder and needs 24-hour care.

"We all have access to her medical information," said Goldberg, president of North East Training Group, a provider of information technology instruction, "and the site sends e-mail reminders that say 'You're taking your mother to the doctor,' which is a really nice feature." The site, she says, saves a lot of phone calls and e-mails.

One in four US families are currently juggling caregiving responsibilities, according to the National Alliance for Caregiving. And that has brought a surge in Web-based service companies like Lotsa Helping Hands (lotsahelpinghands.com) that offer an online calendar for organizing meals, appointments, and transportation; Care.com, which allows users to find caregivers based on ZIP codes; and Parent Care Call (parentcarecall.com), which makes phone calls to remind those living alone when to take their medicine.

According to the 2006 MetLife Caregiving Cost Study, the annual cost of lost productivity resulting from employees' care-giving responsibilities is estimated at \$33.6 billion, or \$2,110 for each caregiver employed full time.

Since caregiverhelper.com went live in December, the number of users has doubled each month. (They currently have fewer than 1,000.)

"Web-based services are becoming an integral part of the decision making process, helping families navigate the increasingly complicated healthcare system," said Shane Herlet, director of operations at Benchmark Assisted Living in Wellesley.

Such services also help disseminate information to family members. In 1999, Hal Chapel, of Sudbury, learned that his friend's wife had been diagnosed with ovarian cancer. For four years, Chapel's family coordinated with friends and neighbors who wanted to help. The woman died in 2003.

"After experiences like too many meals showing up on the doorstep one evening, or someone forgetting to pick her up for a medical appointment, we began to talk about figuring out a way to coordinate [the logistics] using the Internet," Chapel said.

In 2005, Chapel and Barry Katz, the friend who'd lost his wife, launched Lotsa Helping Hands (lotsahelpinghands.com) which began as a comprehensive calendar and now includes community-building features like message boards, blogs, and a place to post photos.

They have since partnered with more than 50 of the largest national health organizations, including the American Lung Association, Lance Armstrong Foundation, Multiple Sclerosis Foundation, and ALS Foundation.

While it originally focused on things like cancer and stroke, Lotsa Helping Hands is becoming more involved in elderly and long-term care. In November, it partnered with the Alzheimer's Association. Lotsa Helping Hands also licenses its service to for-profit organizations like Agis, an elder care portal (Agis.com) and hospices like Horizon (Horizonhospice.com), as well as to nonprofits like the American Lung Association.

Andy Mandell, executive director of the Defeat Diabetes Foundation, said he likes the 24-hour accessibility and comprehensiveness of Web services because "They offer families an opportunity to share information with each other, and have a place to store valuable documents like insurance papers, and to communicate quickly and efficiently. In addition, his group also gets an opportunity to affect the "conversation" about diabetes in a positive way and to offer solutions. Defeatdiabetes.org currently gets about 100,000 unique visitors per month.

Andrea Cohen, cofounder of Houseworks (house-works.com), which helps seniors live independently, plans to collaborate with an online organization this year.

"Many of our customers are adult baby boomers who are very busy and want to be able to access the information whenever they need it, whether it's during the business day or the middle of the night," Cohen said. "This is just another way to communicate with them that we think is really great."

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