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## **FRIENDS FOUNDATION FOR THE AGING**

### **Grant Application**

**September 15, 2021**

#### ***Executive Summary***

The pandemic has created a perfect storm of distress for caregivers. Montco SAAC is seeking a \$30,000 grant from the Friends Foundation for the Aging to pilot a virtual peer-led caregiver support group. Watching a loved one – whether a spouse, parent or friend – decline physically or mentally can be challenging. And, it is even more difficult if providing care for that loved one falls on you.

Support groups for caregivers provide an opportunity to learn from others who share the same caregiving challenges. Quite often, people come away from support group meetings eager to try new approaches to caregiving. They also gain the sense of perspective and caregiver stress management that comes from hearing others talk about their experiences.

#### ***Project Details***

Caring for loved ones as they age is never easy. There are tons of factors that can make it taxing physically, mentally, financially, and more for both the caregiver and the one receiving care. This has always been the case, but with the emergence of COVID-19, things have only gotten more difficult. Multigenerational needs have also become even more pressing during the Covid-19 pandemic, with record numbers of adult children moving back home, children attending remote school, and elderly parents needing new forms of care. The pandemic has put many in untenable positions; people who were already bearing intense loads are facing more strain, stress, and precariousness.

This pressure is only mounting on the sandwich generation, as support and vital resources are scarce. In the broadest sense, the “sandwich generation” is the “caught in the middle” generation who have living parents and children. More specifically, the term often refers to middle-aged people who support both their parents and their children, whether financially, physically, or emotionally. We’re also seeing more “triple-decker sandwich” or “double sandwich” individuals. This involves, for instance, people in their 60s helping to care for their grandchildren, which allows their adult children to work, as well as supporting their own parents in their 90s.

Covid-19 is also pushing millennials into the sandwich generation faster than might be expected. In the US, millennials now make up more than one-third of multigenerational

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caregivers – and this rate has been growing much faster during the pandemic than for Gen Xers and Baby Boomers. In other words, the pandemic has accelerated the slide into the sandwich, and with fewer of the resources that helped previous generations out. As well, the general trend of smaller family sizes means that there will be more only children in the future, with no sibling support as they look after aging parents.

A recent paper in the Journal of Pain and Symptom Management explains how the pandemic is likely to raise the stress levels of family caregivers and affect their mental health. Some of the factors contributing to poorer mental health among caregivers in this period are:

- an increased sense of isolation and reduced access to official sources of support due to physical distancing measures increased
- financial strain
- delays or cancellations in formal primary care services for themselves and their loved ones

Successful caregivers know that they are responsible for taking care of themselves as well as for their loved one. Part of this balance is physical. Often, caregivers focus so intently on helping others that they neglect to eat well, exercise regularly, keep their own doctor's appointments, or even get adequate rest, all of which contribute to elevating caregiver stress. Research has shown that informal caregivers are at a high risk of experiencing chronic stress, as well as anxiety and depression.

In 2015 it was estimated that approximately 43.5 million adults in the U.S. have provided unpaid care to either a child or another adult. That number increased to 53 million in 2020, as reported by the National Alliance for Caregiving (NAC) and AARP. Today, family caregivers represent over one in five Americans and that number continues to grow as the aging population increases, and more people are diagnosed with debilitating disorders that require daily care.

The 2020 report also revealed that caregivers are in worse health today than they were in 2015. A phenomenon commonly called "caregiver stress" results from the many tasks and responsibilities that caregivers take on when they step up to the plate to care for a debilitated loved one or a child with a chronic illness.

One factor, found to improve the overall well-being of caregivers, is the benefit of attending regular support group meetings. A support group provides an opportunity for people to share personal experiences and feelings, coping strategies, or firsthand information about diseases or treatments.

The common experience among members of a support group often means they have similar feelings, worries, everyday problems, treatment decisions, or treatment side effects.



Participating in a group provides you with an opportunity to be with people who are likely to have a common purpose and likely to understand one another.

Connecting with others is a vital part of the caregiving equation. Face-to-face community support groups are great if you can take a break from your caregiving responsibilities for a short while. However, with today's busy schedules, caregivers we have surveyed tell us they may not be able to find time to, or be comfortable with, attending an in-person group. Benefits of online groups include:

- More frequent or flexible participation
- Opportunities for people who may not have local face-to-face support groups
- A degree of privacy or anonymity

Support groups for caregivers foster the setting for sharing information, insight, advice, and encouragement. They provide an opportunity to learn from others who face the same challenges and allow you to talk about your experiences. Caregiver support group meetings can give you new approaches to caregiving, including ones that worked for others in a similar situation. You can also gain perspective and caregiver stress management tools that come from hearing others talk about their experiences.

Montco SAAC will create a Pilot virtual peer-led support group for caregivers. We value the inclusiveness of all voices and to that end, we will perform targeted outreach to the BIPOC and LGBTQ caregiver communities.

Prior to establishing our caregiver support group, the social work team at Montco SAAC will meet and determine the following:

- How often should the group meet?
- What is the best way to communicate? Zoom, Facetime, etc.
- What is the duration of the meetings?
- Is the meeting open or closed? Basically, can people join after the group has started?
- What are the group rules?
- How many people are welcome to join? The more the merrier or smaller the better?
- How will we get people to attend the group?
- Will we set a minimum or maximum number of participants per meeting? (Between 3 and 15 is often suggested)
- What level of confidentiality will be expected from group members? How will issues of broken confidentiality be dealt with?

We also plan to mail each participant a caregiver support kit with self-care resources and for those without the hardware or access to the internet, we will purchase and provide hotspots and tablets.



Our plan is to partner with organizations in Montgomery County to help promote our Pilot Caregiver Support Group to their constituency. One partner for example is ACLAMO, a nonprofit community service organization that provides educational programs, social services, and access to health and wellness programs to Latinos. Based on conversations we have had previously with ACLAMO, we know that a significant percentage of their clients are living in multi-generational households and face the same caregiving challenges. We are prepared to offer the caregiver support group in Spanish for this population as well. Likewise, we will partner with the Philip Jaisohn Memorial Foundation to reach members of the Korean community in Montgomery County.

Other Montgomery County-based senior service organizations that we will partner with include ElderNet of Lower Merion and Narberth, Project Hearth, and SAGE, which provides advocacy and services to the LGBT elder community. Local hospitals Einstein and Suburban will be included in our outreach efforts and we also plan to partner with our own Art Center at Ambler to provide a guided art therapy component to the support group.

In addition to collecting standard demographic data on participants and the number of people attending, we believe it is important to encourage members to provide feedback to the group on a regular basis. Montco SAAC will do this by preparing surveys at regular intervals with questions such as:

- Is the environment welcoming?
- What works for you?
- What does not work and how can we improve it?
- What were your expectations coming into this group?
- Were your expectations about the group met?

When participants continue their engagement with the group that can be one sign of success. However, the number of people attending is not necessarily the best way to judge the success of a peer-led support group. A successful open peer group remains effective even as participants come and go and the group's chemistry and dynamic changes.

Pre and post-survey questions to participants at regular intervals will include the following:

- Do members give and receive emotional support on a regular basis?
- Do longer-term members support newcomers?
- Are members avoiding judging others while providing warmth and acceptance?
- Are members "graduating" from the group?

While caregivers come to peer support groups for comfort and advice, they are often surprised to find a sense of worth through becoming a mentor to others—a feeling they might be experiencing for the first time. By developing a relationship of trust with their peers, they will often work with one another to create plans for responding to challenges and taking care of



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themselves beyond the group. After all, succeeding beyond the group is the ultimate goal of peer support.

Other known benefits of participating in a support group may include:

- Feeling less lonely, isolated, or judged
- Reducing distress, depression, anxiety, or fatigue
- Talking openly and honestly about your feelings
- Improving skills to cope with challenges
- Staying motivated to manage chronic conditions or stick to treatment plans
- Gaining a sense of empowerment, control, or hope
- Improving understanding of a disease and your own experience with it
- Getting practical feedback about treatment options
- Learning about health, economic or social resources

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**Budget**

Other sources of support: OSS Contract for Senior Center Services:

- \$10,000 for administrative and social worker support

Budget requested of FFA:

- Admin: \$5,000
- Social Work Staff and Peer Facilitators: \$15,000
- Program Supplies (workgroup and technology for some): \$7,500
- Promotion/Printing: \$2,500

Budget Narrative:

By far the largest expense (\$15K) for this project will be our Social Work staff time. We have two staff Social Workers assigned to develop and implement the Pilot Virtual Peer-led Caregiver Support Group. As mentioned in the grant proposal, the next highest expense (\$7,500) is to purchase hotspots and tablets for any participant in need so they can access the virtual sessions. We also plan to create and mail welcome kits to the participants. We have also included Administrative expenses (\$5K) in the budget as well as printing and materials (\$2,500) for marketing the group to the community.