Local Charity Shows ‘Thank You’ Goes a Long Way

By Nathan Hamme

Thanksgiving is a time of contemplation for Americans. It’s a chance to reflect on the truly meaningful things in our lives. Our families. Our friends. And, often, our health.

For the nation’s sick and elderly, however, a personal caregiver might be near the top of that list. Anyone who has witnessed the power of a caregiver’s touch can understand their impact.

And the essential role of the caregiver in our society is only likely to grow. Due to demographic changes, the population over 65 has almost doubled since the 1960’s. They number approximately 50 million individuals and 13 percent of all Americans.

In preparation for this “silver wave,” there has been a push to recruit workers into the healthcare field. But Medicare, Medicaid and other healthcare cost pressures have hampered caregiver pay increases.

The result has been that many long-term nursing facilities and at-home care providers lose 30 percent or more of their staff each year. Hospitals routinely pay over $30,000 to replace and retain each registered nurse they lose. And studies routinely show that experienced caregivers provide better outcomes for the healthcare consumer.

Given this context – that replacement costs are burdensome and patient care suffers as a result – why not focus primarily on keeping talented caregivers in the field?

Indeed, and in the spirit of our Thanksgiving holiday, perhaps a simple “thank you” to our nation’s caregivers could go a long way. Falls Church resident Matt and Roxannay Lawlor were thinking along those same lines four years ago, after a family experience and volunteer work at a local rehab center.

The idea ignited an element of Matt’s success running a public company, where a staff-pass-to-pass recognition program became a key driver of the company’s customer and team-oriented culture.

The Lawlor family, including sons Jack and Paul, were inspired to create a Caca Foundation – a name derived from “Celebrating caregivers.” They set out to fund and support caregiver recognition programs at 10 D.C.-area healthcare facilities.

Before I began my work with Caca back in early 2014, the Foundation had already successfully piloted an Arlington-based rehab center. Since then, our healthcare partnerships have grown in number and variety – including acute care hospitals, long-term care nursing homes, hospice centers, mental health and other rehab facilities. Our partners serve widely diverse cared-for populations, and staff sizes range from 20 to 2,500 employees.

Ultimately, we strive to create a flexible, accessible and “turnkey” solution that serves the full spectrum of healthcare institutions who wish to honor and reward their exceptional caregivers.

New social networking and communication technologies have made this more possible than ever. Our proprietary web-based recognition platform has been operational for over five years. Using a smartphone app or web browser, healthcare staff, patients, residents, families and visitors may nominate a caregiver for a monthly or quarterly Caca Award.

Nominations are encouraged to cite an exemplary act of caregiving – a nurse keeping a secret, a doctor rescuing a patient’s son, a nurse noting an unreported symptom of a patient in a waiting area, or an example of how one person is making a difference.

By first-hand feedback, our clients and the public agree that these initiatives improve patient satisfaction, staff retention, and knowledge of the meaning of their work.

Early participation and engagement metrics are so encouraging that we plan to continue all of our DC-area programs. We also recently announced our intent to expand our caregiver recognition programs nationwide.

And while aspirations for Caca have always been national in scope, the story has remained a local one. Many of the organization’s contributors have called Falls Church home, including myself. Board members Mary Ann Yancey and Adam Sowards, and marketing consultants Steve Gram and Meredith Hamilton.

Transitioning from a small, local startup to a nationwide presence advocating for compassionate care has meant providing a dynamic product and well-said processes. Realizing our program requires additional resources, both human and financial, to reach the local.

But the impact made on caregivers, patients, residents and families can be very meaningful. Caregivers appreciate the focus on their “labor of love,” and the acknowledgment of their efforts. And the patient experience can be transformed from one mired in frustration to one centered on the healing and rehabilitative needs of the patient. It renews appreciation for the inherent value of every caregiver’s effort.

Guest Column

Nathan Hamme is managing director of Caca Foundation.