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GUEST COMMENTARY

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 15 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 over 50 percent of their staff each year. Hospitals routinely pay over \$30,000 to replace and retrain 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 residents Matt and Rosemary Lawlor were thinking along those same lines four

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years ago, after a family experience and volunteer work at a local rehab center.

The idea integrated an element of Matt's success running a public company – where a staff peer-to-peer 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 Ceca 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 Ceca 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, hos-

pice centers, mental health and other rehab facilities. Our partners serve widely diverse cared-for populations, and staff sizes range from 50 to 2500 employees.

Ultimately, we strive to create a flexible, accessible, and "turnkey" solution that serves the full spectrum of healthcare institutions who seek 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 two years. Using a smartphone app or web browser, healthcare staff, patients, residents, families and visitors may nominate a caregiver for a monthly or quarterly Ceca Award.

Nominators are encouraged to cite an exemplary act of caregiving – a housekeeper escorting a lost family member to a resident's room; a nurse noting an aggravating symptom of a patient in a waiting area; an activities assistant discovering and cultivating a nursing home resident's long-muted passion – and are able to share their story through the website.

Award honorees are selected by an independent panel, and receive cash awards ranging from \$250 – \$1,000. Other staff receiving nominations appear on a "CecaTV" monitor located in a main thoroughfare of the facility. This extends appreciation far beyond the individual honorees: on average, almost a third of each facility's staff are publicly recognized through the program.

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 program nationally.

And while aspirations for Ceca have always been national in scope, the story has been uniquely a local one. Many of the organization's contributors have called Falls Church home, including myself, Board members MaryAnn Yancey and Adam Edwards, and marketing consultants Steve Cram and Meredith Hamme.

Transitioning from a small, local start-up to a nationwide presence advocating for compassionate care has meant providing a dynamic product and well-refined processes. Scaling our program requires additional resources, both human and financial, to handle the load.

But the impact made on caregivers, patients, residents and families can be very meaningful. Caregivers appreciate the focus on their "labors of love," and the acknowledgement of their value. And the patient experience can be transformed from one merely about competence and procedure, to a realization that, at its roots, providing care is primarily about human interaction and empathy.

After all, as author Jim Rohn said, "One person caring about another represents life's greatest value."

► *Nate Hamme is managing director of Ceca Foundation.*