Planning for Future Medical Decisions is Important

George M. Lange likes to use examples when discussing the importance of advance directives. For instance, he often asks people what they think would have made the death of President Kennedy worse. The answer? Lange says that if the nation’s forefathers did not create the position of vice president, the death of President Kennedy would have been far worse.

Same is true with advanced directives – it’s a simple process whereby a person puts into writing what they would like done for them medically if they are unable to communicate. And, to ensure that happens, the person designates an “agent” to speak for them.

“If someone doesn’t know what you want, then your wishes or choices might not happen,” says Lange, a retired primary care physician who is board certified in internal medicine and geriatrics. “I bet there is more than one person in your life that cares about you. And it’s important that at least one person knows what you want.”

Traditionally, there are two forms of advance directive: a living will and a health care power of attorney. Physicians can often provide forms to patients; they are also available online - search “Honoring Choices Wisconsin” on the Wisconsin Medical Society website.

“When you lack an advance directive, the people that care about you are put into a bind. They have a choice to do one of two things: they will do more, or they will do less. And if they don’t know, they will agonize over whether they made the right choice for you. But if they know they are carrying out your directive, the choice will be less difficult.”

The first step is to determine what you want done medically if you cannot communicate, Lange says. Then you decide who is best to ensure your wishes are carried out. Sometimes, it’s a spouse, and sometimes it is adult children. A person can also select other relatives or friends. Every situation, Lange says, is different. “But the agent needs to know what your wishes are and needs to be asked if they want the job,” he adds. “You want your agent to be well-informed so they are comfortable making decisions on your behalf.”

Many doctors have connections with facilitators (frequently social workers or clergy) through their office who can help you fill out the form either in person or via the telephone. Personal clergy can sometimes assist as can friends and relatives.  

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**Eras Program Coordinator is Acutely Aware of Client’s Needs and Concerns**

When an older adult calls Eras Senior Network and Betty Smith answers the telephone, a unique bond immediately takes place. That’s because Betty, who is program coordinator in Eras’ Faith in Action office in Milwaukee County, is also an older adult.

“Being a senior myself, I am very familiar with the client’s needs and concerns,” says Betty, who celebrated her 75th birthday last year and is a grandmother of three. “I am honored to be able to still work and have a connection to other seniors that I love serving.”

Betty has been working with Eras for several years now, coming from the former Interfaith Older Adult Programs agency. She is on the Eras intake team meaning she takes calls for requests from clients – such as transportation to a medical appointment or to the grocery store or helps them get services for other requests.

“On a daily basis, my role is to take incoming calls from clients who are requesting services,” says Betty. “I document those requests so other staff members can match them with volunteers to fulfill those requests. Oftentimes I’m the first person they speak with when they want a ride or if they want to become a new client.”

Quite often, a client will call asking for particular assistance which Eras does not provide. “I meet the client’s needs,” she says. “And sometimes, it is redirecting the client and giving them referrals.”

Born in Tennessee, near Memphis, Betty came to Milwaukee about 50 years ago. She says that her daily hobbies are her friends and her church activities. In fact, she spends every lunch hour Monday through Friday on a prayer group telephone call. “Because of the flexibility this job offers me, I am able to maintain my relationship with that group,” she says. “In fact, we have people in the prayer group from four different states on the conference line and all of them are seniors.”

Does Betty have any advice to clients regarding aging? “Make sure you stay connected,” she says. “Don’t just be alone in your home without having some type of outreach to other people. Don’t just sit. Do what you can do.”

And for Betty, a job that allows her to help others has made all the difference. “I am here to serve Eras clients,” she says. “I see my responsibility as being able to talk them through the intake process or assist with whatever they need.”

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**Do You Need Face Masks?**

Eras received a donation of N95 face masks to distribute to our clients and volunteers. If you are in need of face masks, we are happy to send you some free of charge. To request your masks, please call (414) 488-6500 for Milwaukee County or (262) 549-3348 for Waukesha County.
Catholic Charities Helps Those with Hoarding Disorders

Keeping a lifetime of memories – your oldest child’s first report card, a newspaper from the day you were married or your mother’s favorite coffee mug – is understandable as memories provide comfort and enrich your life.

But when keeping a few items grows to collecting an excessive number of items, not discarding items normally discarded (garbage, wrappers, broken items), rooms which have significant clutter and you’re feeling upset about it all, you might want to consider seeking advice and assistance.

“Hoarding disorder is NOT about the stuff but is an adaption people develop to cope with life (emotional) stressors and manifests into the environment around the individual,” says Carla Alejo, director of In Home Support and Hoarding Program for Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. “Just getting rid of the stuff will not fix the problem. People affected by hoarding disorders need therapy to learn new health coping mechanisms.”

Alejo explains that it’s important to remember that a hoarding disorder doesn’t happen overnight. “You can have it and be in all different stages,” she says. “The disorder will affect not only your living situation but your mental health, financial health, physical health and social health.”

Alejo notes that hoarding is indicated by some behaviors:
• Collecting an excessive amount of items, many of which appear to be useless to most people and not discarding items most people would discard
• Significantly cluttered rooms which prevent activities for which the room was designed
• The individual feels significant despair or stress from the clutter
• The individual’s family and community are affected by the clutter
• The individual is unable to part with their items

Catholic Charities’ Hoarding Intervention & Treatment Program assists people wherever they are on the hoarding spectrum and helps them overcome obstacles. It begins with a telephone call from a case manager to gather information and answer questions. It follows up with in-home visits to determine a care plan and a weekly therapist visit to work through underlying issues.

In addition to the individual treatment program, Catholic Charities also offers support groups. Services are provided on a sliding fee scale. For more information, call Carla Alejo at (414) 771-2881.
Free Tax Preparation Assistance Available for Older Adults

Federal and State tax deadlines are April 18 and once again, volunteers from the AARP can help older adults complete and submit their tax returns at no charge.

Due to COVID, no walk-ins are allowed. To receive help, a person must make an appointment at one of the numerous sites in the Milwaukee area and bring to the appointment required documentation and last year’s tax return.

If all necessary information is approved, the person then leaves and is told to return at a specified time later in the day.

“In the interim period, we will then prepare the tax return,” says Al Ebert, district coordinator for AARP. “When they come back in the afternoon, we go through the return with them and give them a hard copy of the return to take home. In the evening, we electronically file the return with the IRS and the Wisconsin Department of Revenue.”

Volunteers can prepare both taxes and homestead credit paperwork; all volunteers are certified by both the IRS and the AARP.

“This provides older adults with a free tax service,” says Ebert. “We electronically file both federal and state forms for them and provide them with a hard copy. No one is paid for preparing a tax return nor do we charge for it.”

To find an AARP Foundation Tax-Aide location near you and make an appointment, visit aarpfoundation.org/taxaide to locate a site near you.

Meanwhile, tax forms are available at selected libraries in the Milwaukee area; be sure to call your library first to see if a particular form you are looking for is available.

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The facilitation is very important because it promotes a discussion that will encourage you to explore your goals of treatment. “The facilitator is not there to tell you what to do, rather they are there to encourage your thinking about what’s important to you.”

When complete, the advance directive needs to be signed in the presence of witnesses – those witness must be disinterested parties so they cannot be a relative or your doctor. They can be neighbors, professionals where you do business or friends.

Lange stresses that others also know your wishes and know who you selected as your agent. “It’s so important to be respectful of others you didn’t select because you don’t want them to torpedo the plans you set up.”

And Lange stressed that signing the advance directive once isn’t always enough. If it has been 10 years since you signed your directive, if your agent has died, if you have been divorced or if you have a newly diagnosed condition or disability, the paperwork should be reviewed. “Any one of these scenarios might change the way about a decision you previously made,” he says.