

from the field of gerontological social work practice

## DOES HOME CARE NEED AN "EDEN ALTERNATIVE"?

Most of us in the field of aging are aware of "The Eden Alternative." Developed in the early 1990s by Frank & Carter Williams, among others, and widely disseminated in the 2004 book *What Are Old People For?* by William H. Thomas, MD, the philosophy seeks to infuse the best of what we associate with "home" (warmth, ease, ability to follow one's own rhythms and preferences, control as to how needs are met and tasks accomplished) into the institution. Many of the finest long-term care facilities are engaged in these efforts. Though they may use different names for their initiatives and paths to their goals, all are united in their efforts to humanize and individualize the care residents receive.

Ironically, during the same time period, some of the worst of what we associate with "institution" (cold, rushed, indifferent, routinized approach to care by a rapidly changing cast of providers) has found its way into home care. Here, again, the finest home care agencies work ceaselessly to personalize care and build sustaining relationships between aides and the older adults they serve. We all have stories of such relationships - powerful bonds between aide and client that enrich both lives. We also, unfortunately, have "horror stories" where everything goes wrong.

There are larger issues involved, of course. Recruitment and retention of direct care workers is a problem across the board. Certified nursing assistants and home health aides are themselves vulnerable populations - often poor women doing hard work for low pay, while they struggle with their own social and financial problems. Resolving these issues on a mega level is beyond the scope of the case manager who juggles the needs of many older clients receiving home care. Yet there are small steps that can yield great rewards - steps that can mitigate what Thomas calls the "cruel comfort of strangers feeding, bathing, dressing, and entertaining strangers" (p. 181).

Elise Feuerstein Karras, a practicing social worker and associate at SBW Partners, suggests one approach on page 2.

We look forward to hearing some of yours - and including in a future issue.

**SBW Partners** is a fee-for-service firm devoted to advancing social work practice in aging. Services are provided by Dr. Barbara Silverstone and Dr. Ann Burack-Weiss, the firm's founding partners, and a group of associates. We provide consultation and staff development for agencies, supervision for practitioners and corporate training programs. For more information, please visit [www.sbwpartners.com](http://www.sbwpartners.com) or call 212.337.2555.

## SETTING THE STAGE FOR A SUCCESSFUL ELDER/HOME CARE WORKER RELATIONSHIP

As ordinary citizens in NYC, we would never open our homes to a stranger for many reasons. However, when our clients accept in home services, most of the time they are expected to do just that - open their homes to strangers, pushing the trust borders to the limit, in hope of getting the care they need. Without any introduction, discussion about expectations and the support this sensitive relationship needs, it is no wonder that as agency social workers, we find our time consumed with negotiating and trying to fix this relationship, which, one can say, had little chance of success from the get go.

There is one way to help this delicate relationship get off to a positive start - facilitate the relationship from the very first visit. I propose that an agency social worker or care manager, whether from a home care agency or community agency, meet with the home care worker at the client's home or apartment on the first visit, engage the two in active discussion about tasks and expectations and facilitate the beginning of a healthy, working relationship. The hour that it takes to help the dyad communicate and bond will result in far less time trying to fix the relationship or finding a new worker.

Some of the issues to be addressed are:

- How would each like to be addressed (first name or more formally)
- The hours of work and what the worker needs to do if she is running late or absent
- The tasks the client needs to have done and are there special ways that she'd like to have them done
- Food preparation - what things does she like to eat and are there foods that she doesn't like or can't eat - opening up a discussion about cultural issues around food preparation and identification
- How the client would like her shopping done

Remember that it is not only the client who anticipates this meeting, but the worker as well. Beginning the first meeting in a friendly and socially acceptable way, sometimes over food, the worker and client are set at ease and more open to engage in discussion. The professional presence enables the conversation to move forward rather than perhaps be mired by silences, uneasiness and other impediments to good communication and relationship building.

- Elise Feuerstein Karras, LMSW, CSW-G, ACSW