

Patty Schachtner: Doing more to support family caregivers

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Last week, Department of Health Services Secretary Andrea Palm joined us in Baldwin to hold a roundtable of family caregivers from all over our area. This is an important issue that we are working to address on the Governor's Task Force on Caregiving because as Wisconsin's population ages, supporting long-term care is becoming even more critical.

Wisconsin's aging population continues to grow- especially in rural, northern areas like ours, where more than 25% of residents are 65 or older. For example in Burnett County, over 41% of the population is over the age of 65.

Meanwhile, the 85 and over population in Wisconsin will grow by 120% by 2040- the fastest growing of any age group.

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While both of these populations grow, our crisis of quality, reliable long-term care will grow as well because family caregivers, rather than paid professionals, provide care to around 90% of the long-term care population. This unpaid caregiving is so prevalent that one out of six members of our state's workforce are also unpaid caregivers. And 30% of those caregivers are over 65 themselves.

In Baldwin, we brought family caregivers to the table to give us the stories beyond the statistics. Their stories were striking.

We heard from people like Darci who began caring for her husband, Mike, in 2017 when he was diagnosed with probable early-onset Alzheimer's. After a few years,

she had to move him into an assisted living facility which is costing her \$6,000 every month. To cover the expenses, Darci is has been forced to tap into their IRA. As she said, “we are all one illness from poverty.”

Jamie shared his difficult story of caring for not only his spouse, but also his daughter. Jamie’s 11 year old daughter has muscular dystrophy that requires significant care around the clock. A few years ago, his wife was diagnosed with Progressive Multiple Sclerosis too. Although the state has approved his daughter for 30 hours of personal care, workers are in short supply and Jamie can’t get the help he needs. In western Wisconsin, certified nursing assistants and personal care aides can head across the border where they face fewer barriers to certification and can earn a higher reimbursement rate for their work.

Jan told us that though she worked in senior care for 32 years, nothing could have prepared her for becoming a full time caregiver for her husband with Alzheimer’s. Judy, who spent her career working in healthcare, shared that she has been caring for her husband with a variety of chronic health problems since 2011. She said she has recently given herself permission to grieve the losses she’s had in dealing with his care.

I am so thankful for all the caregivers that joined us to share their stories this week. Family and other unpaid caregivers give up so much of themselves to keep their loved one safe, healthy, and happy. As Bonnie told us, they look to “find the grateful joy in every day.” Wisconsin’s caregivers and those in need of long-term care must have access to all the resources and support they need to find that joy in every day.

Caregivers can get help from their local Aging and Disability Resource Center by visiting www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/adrc/consumer/index.htm.

- *Schachtner, D-Somerset, represents Wisconsin’s 10th Senate District.*