



Caregiver Teas at Central Vermont Council on Aging Barb Asen, Caregiver Coordinator

Caregiver Teas were invented by CVCOA's Family Caregiver Support Program as an innovative approach to caregiver outreach and service. There is nothing else like it in Central Vermont. It only asks of participants that they spend an hour in a pleasant and easily accessible setting, being served tea of choice in elegant (donated) china cups, sampling other appealing refreshments, and enjoying the company. It is a novelty for many of the participants to be the party served – they are so accustomed by nature or momentum of their caregiving role to do for others.

Caregiver Teas are offered six times a year at Central Vermont Council on Aging in Barre, VT. These free events invite family caregivers to take a break from caregiving duties, enjoy the company of peers, be pampered a bit, and refresh themselves with wellness and creative activities that can also be shared at home. While different from a class or a support group, Caregiver Teas likewise provide the opportunity for community members to connect with information, resources, CVCOA staff and fellow caregivers. Brief activities at each Tea promote positive self-awareness and wellness. Examples of offerings are "Chair Tai Chi," "Hand Self-Massage" and "Relax Your Mind", as well as "Gratitude Doodles," "Memory Journals," and "Poems We Love". The program requires about 40 hours total staff time per year to put on six Teas. Refreshments, supplies and copying for handouts may cost \$60 per year. Space and utilities are provided by the Council on Aging. The total operating cost for the most recent fiscal year is \$1500 including overhead.

Family caregivers are busy people -- busy doing for others, busy juggling appointments, busy holding family and finances together, busy coping. It is very easy for family caregivers to neglect their own social and wellness needs. We created Caregiver Teas to be an easy, inviting way for folks to schedule a break and have a pleasurable experience to help refill their well (by the teaspoon or cupful). It has attracted people who are uncertain about the fit of formal support groups, and often serves as a feeder or follow-up to Memory Café, respite grant access, and classes such as "Powerful Tools for Caregivers".

The small group format of Caregiver Tea promotes social interaction without being over-stimulating. Participants leave refreshed and feeling less alone. A self-care or expressive arts activity is featured at each Tea, offering new tools to enhance caregiver and care receiver well-being every day. In this way, Caregiver Teas help community members sustain their ability to care for loved ones at home with greater energy, compassion, skills and resources.

As the population ages so does the reliance of the community on unpaid family caregivers. In addition to accessing and managing health services, public benefits and various supports for loved ones in their care, family caregivers need ways to relieve the pressure they are under and connect with common sense experience and information from peers. The quasi-elegant yet informal nature of Caregiver Teas offers an appealing environment for the sharing of resources and social networking to support this important demographic. Staffing at Caregiver Teas by the Area Agency on Aging provides additional access to important information and expertise for caregivers and care receivers.

To learn more about supports for caregivers, or how to start a Caregiver Teas in your organization, contact Barb Asen, basen@cvcoa.org or call Barb at 476-2681.