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A Tribute to Diane Slezak and a Look Back On AgeOptions History of Serving Older Adults

Diane Slezak, AgeOptions chief operating officer, celebrated her 41st anniversary with the agency on December 20. Diane joined the agency just two years after it was founded in 1974. Jonathan Lavin, president and CEO, recalls some of the highlights of Diane's role in guiding AgeOptions and creating our most important and effective programs.

By Jonathan Lavin
AgeOptions President and CEO



Diane Slezak, AgeOptions COO

Diane was here when I arrived in 1978 and has demonstrated amazing commitment, ingenuity, loyalty and recognition along the way. Every AgeOptions program has benefited from Diane's touch and support. I want to take this opportunity to thank Diane and share some history with you. Here are some highlights.

Diane began as the first Senior Companion Program director in Illinois as AgeOptions successfully applied for the program serving suburban Cook County. She advanced to our south suburban field representative, Suburban Cook County Community Care Program director, deputy director of AgeOptions and to her current position as chief operating officer.

After establishing the suburban Cook County Senior Companion Program from scratch with responsibilities for identifying host sites, recruiting volunteers and meeting the match requirements for the now-Corporation for Volunteer Services senior program, Diane took on the

position of South Suburban field representative, representing us throughout the south suburbs. (That's when I started.)

When we were asked to establish a home care program now known as the Community Care Program, she recruited an outstanding corps of social workers to perform Determination of Need Assessments (DON) and prepare care plans, established a strong group of contracted home and adult day services providers and responded to the endless lists of those who were receiving or requesting services during the brief time we oversaw the Region 13 Community Care Program. Diane was on the committee that designed, tested and proved the value of the DON, which is still in use.

Diane went on to construct the Chicago Community Trust proposal that organized 20 community partners to explore the effectiveness of 21 outreach techniques to reach more than 100,000 suburban Cook County residents in our \$800,000 grant from the Trust. Called the Best Kept Secret, our program prepared a comprehensive guide of benefits and services for reference by community outreach workers, it prepared inserts for Sunday newspapers at a time people read newspapers, and it delivered on every promise we made to the Trust and to our partner community agencies.

That program transitioned to our Red Tape Cutters Program, the establishment of BenefitsCheckUp.org with the National Council on Aging, and our continued commitment to connecting older persons to the benefits and services designed for them.

Going forward, Diane's contributions to Adult Protective Services included her service on the Department on Aging's Advisory Committee on Self Neglect, which developed rules that established the program.

It was Diane's curiosity about the impact of managed care organizations on Medicare beneficiaries that led us to the development of a proposal to explain the requirements of health care plans to older consumers. That was Health Care Choices, which later became our answer to coordinating and informing hundreds of community agencies on what was in store for them and their clients when we established the Make Medicare Work Coalition in response to the establishment of Part D of Medicare.

When the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation invited proposals for the Community Partnership Demonstration, Diane worked with the Community Memorial Foundation in the west suburbs, Aging Care Connections and a wide variety of community members to prepare a winning proposal and attempt to meet the Foundation's expectations.

We waited years for an opportunity to involve the south suburbs in a collaboration that built on their strengths and community. That finally came with the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation's request for family caregiver support proposals. Caring Together, Living Better was one of 16 programs funded nationally. It focuses on faith-based support and created a caregiver curriculum that takes into consideration who is learning and how to best ease the burdens of caregiving for dedicated family members.

We have also created Senior Medicare Patrol, the National Family Caregiver Support Program, Take Charge of Your Health and other great programs during Diane's tenure. Her leadership and creativity continue to be essential to meeting the changing needs of our older adult population and ensuring older adults' safety, well-being and quality of life.