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**HOLDING A FAMILY MEETING**

A “family meeting” is a chance for spouses, children, and significant others involved to discuss the support of a family member, to identify needs, share responsibilities and come up with an action plan that will best serve the family member and family as a whole.

A family meeting respects the family member and his or her decisions, while acknowledging and supporting the primary caregiver.

Each family is different. In some families, only a husband/wife and their children are considered “family.” In other families, aunts, uncles, cousins, current and ex-in laws and close friends may be included in the definition of family. When planning a family meeting, it is important to include everyone who is or will be part of the caregiving team, and this may include a family friend, neighbor or paid caregiver.

**Helpful Hints:**

* Listen to the family member. Use respectful listening and keep an open mind. There will be differences in opinions, values, and relationships. A successful family meeting gives everyone a chance to be heard. All feelings are appropriate and need to be expressed and acknowledged. People will be more willing to talk about their feelings regarding the situation if they feel safe. For example, the brother who is never present may reveal that he is unable to stand seeing someone sick, and the sister who is doing all the work may not realize how she pushes others away when they offer to help. Another sibling may be having marital problems which he or she has not yet shared with the family, and yet another sibling might be worried about losing a job. Each person needs to balance his/her own fears, concern, love and desire to help with available time, strengths, weaknesses and hopes.
* Talk directly to the family member and provide sufficient time for their response.
* Ask everyone to use “I” statements to express their needs, feelings, and concerns. It is important for each family member to learn to use “I” messages, as well to say “I need...” rather than “You should...” Even when disagreeing, they should try to find the part of what is said that they can agree with.
* No interrupting or side conversations.
* Turn off cell phones, radio, and TV.
* Stay focused on the purpose, for example “helping Dad maintain independent living for as long as possible” or “planning for a move.”
* Avoid using “always” or “never”.
* Give everyone an opportunity to be heard.
* Avoid making assumptions.
* Ask questions to get the facts.
* Remember that the family member has the right and responsibility to make his or her own decisions.

**Before the Family Meeting**

* Ask the family member whom they want to attend.
* Consider all relevant family members and professionals.
* Pick a convenient date, time, and place. Arrange a conference call if possible for those who cannot attend.
* List issues to be discussed based on the goals of the family member. Issues may include: help with household tasks, home safety, medical needs, caregiver stress and workload, end of life decisions, legal and financial management.
* Develop an agenda based on the individual’s issues. Keep the agenda short so each issue receives full attention and to allow time to discuss next steps.
* Collect information that may be helpful such as medical reports or legal documents.
* Consider a professional (social worker, care coordinator or clergy member) to facilitate the meeting if needed or requested by the individual.

**The Family Meeting**

* Arrange seating so all can see and hear each other.
* Start the meeting with a welcome.
* Select a person to take notes on decisions, assignment of tasks, and follow-up items.
* Review the agenda and use it to stay on task.
* Address the most important issues first so they receive full attention.
* Reach a sense of closure on each issue. Put issues that arise during the meeting in a “parking lot” to be addressed later.
* Create an action plan that includes what needs to be done and who will do it. Include a back-up plan in case of emergency.
* Summarize the discussion and review all decisions made. At the conclusion of the meeting, make sure everyone has a clear understanding of the issues and considerations discussed. When the solutions to issues have been established, make sure that each person understands what he/she has agreed to do.
* Identify a family spokesperson who will communicate the decisions to non-family members such as home care, physician, and others.
* Plan the next meeting if needed.

**Follow Up**

* If the family member agrees, share the plan with those who need to know.
* Stay connected through mail, phone calls, email, or a website.