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Senior Citizens at a Crossroads

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Seniors often find themselves at a murky crossroads, not knowing which way to turn when they begin to need assistance. All too often they experience both gradual and swift changes under which even the best laid plans may need to be rethought.

The troubling question many seniors face today is whom to rely on when they need help. Traditionally, family units were the primary resource for seniors. But as we know, life has become more complex. Needs have become greater as we live longer, while the time and availability of the traditional caregivers have all but evaporated in many families. Importantly, many seniors today do not want to rely on their families. Every community and all economic groups face these concerns.

"Today people's bodies all too often outlive their minds," said an official at the county Surrogate's Court, commenting on what he considers the singlemost life storm seniors face. "The biggest crisis occurs when mental faculties fail first."

"A big concern is that there is no quarterback helping the senior coordinate all their issues," acknowledged Rich Bellew, a local CPA.

"One of the most frustrating things in care management is seeing the forest for the trees. With the bulk of people we see coming into the court system the banker is not talking to the accountant, who is not necessarily talking to the doctor, and so on," said the county Surrogate's Court official.

Christina McCoy, a Cold Spring M&T Bank officer, has seen this confusion becoming an insurmountable hurdle for the aging. "This dilemma leads to questions regarding options mature adults have if they do not have any family onboard to help manage their lives," she said.

So just how might today's senior coordinate the planning process with doctors, attorneys, CPAs, financial planners, insurance companies, bankers, investments advisors, family, direct care workers, and government services?

Bernard Krooks, a White Plains attorney and past president of the National Academy of Elder Law Attorneys, advises people not to wait till it is too late. "Get your affairs in order before you get a stroke or are diagnosed with Alzheimer's," he cautioned. John Greener, a local CPA who specializes in providing adult and elder services, added, "You want to make sure your wishes are understood by someone you trust and that, if needed, they are willing and able to act on your behalf. It's paramount to appoint someone who will look after your interests and who is also capable and up to the task. This can be a family member, a friend, or a qualified professional."

If the senior has not done the proper planning and there are no relatives or friends willing, able, and available to provide care, the denouement usually occurs in the courts. "There is a list of certified guardians available to the court," said the county Surrogate's Court official. "A couple are notforprofits designed specifically to be appointed, which earn money in their capacity as guardians. Also involved are private individuals, such as attorneys and CPAs specializing in eldercare, social workers, and mental health professionals. All these professionals must be trained and certified."

John Greener, who is eligible for appointment as a certified guardian by the New York court system said, "The courts are there to protect the elderly, but the process can be frustrating, burdensome and costly. The courts are only supposed to become involved when no one is properly caring for the person. You really want to stay out of the court system by making sure that there is someone in place who will be there for you if you need help and that you've authorized them to act on your behalf. You want to know that your assets will be protected, your bills will be paid and that you will be properly cared for. These steps are important for your wishes to be followed if you start to lose capacity cognitively or physically."

"This risk of uncertainty is another reason for good financial planning," added Rich Bellew. "And although some people do plan early, the plan has to be fluid. What's appropriate for people in their 50s and 60s may not apply when they reach more advanced years."

Christina McCoy of M&T Bank recalled one way she was able to make a difference. "I recently taught a gentleman whose deceased wife always paid the bills how to do this online," she said. "He comes in whenever he has a question, and it's getting easier for him now."

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