

# Helping Congregants with Out-of-Area Parents

**M**any churches, temples and other faith communities have active members whose parents are aging. If these members live at a distance from their parents, they may need additional support as they navigate that new territory. We hope the following perspectives and resources will help you support them in navigating their own particular circumstances.

## Encourage Connection

Phone calls, handwritten letters, emails and video chats are great ways to stay in touch with aging parents. They can also provide an invaluable look into how the parents are doing.

During a phone call, it can be easy to ask questions like, “How are you?” and get a simple reply of, “I’m fine.” By taking questions a step further, family members can get a better sense of how their parents are doing without sounding overly intrusive. For example, “What have you been eating for breakfast these days?” or “What’s



your lunch routine?” This approach can provide insight on their day-to-day life as well as answer important questions like whether or not they’re getting enough to eat.

Being at a distance means many families don’t notice changes in a parent’s health or function until they’re able to visit in person. When families come together for Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hanukkah

and other holidays, many adults worry about changes they see from the previous year. When families can’t visit as often as they’d like, asking for support from friends and family members who live nearer is helpful. This broader community can be the eyes and ears by visiting in person and sharing their impressions to help families at a distance stay up to date.

*Continued*

*“The best thing is not to come on full blast. Bring up sensitive subjects like moving when opportunities arise. You can incorporate questions naturally and lead the conversation to a point where you can ask a tough question gently. And talk about it more than once if you can. Each time, you’ll find you get more information.”*

Doug Fiser, Sales Specialist, Meadowlark



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## Cultivate Compassion

When connecting with others, what we say is as important as how we say it. It's normal to want to help, but family members can go into "fix it" mode, sometimes coming across as critical or controlling. Self-monitoring to prevent harsher statements and tones, especially on hot-button issues, can help keep them from creeping in.

Moving is a great example. Parents may opt to stay at home for as long as possible. This can be a highly emotional decision and often families may try to convince parents to move. Instead of forcing the issue, ease into exploring the topic. A hypothetical approach can make the conversation go more smoothly and provide more detailed information:

- If you wanted to downsize, what would be most important to you in a new home?
- What features would you like to have? A basement? A yard?
- What services would you like? Lawn care? Home maintenance? Laundry service?
- Would you prefer a townhouse, single-family home or a retirement community?
- What are your friends doing? What do they like/dislike?

It's also important for family members to be aware of their own feelings. When adult children live at a distance from their parents, they can feel guilty for not being able to help more readily. Guilt can be an incredibly

*"A huge challenge is making sure older adults have the appropriate services. We can talk with families and prospective residents. If they're thinking about making a move, we want to make sure they have access to care and provide reassurance."*

Kristen Martin, Care Transition Leader,  
Meadowlark

powerful motivator, but it's not always helpful. It may push family members to do what will make them feel better, rather than what's in the best interest of the person they're trying to help. Being honest about one's own feelings can help ease tensions and frustration.

## Research Resources

Many communities offer various resources and services for older adults – everything from meal delivery to art programs. Families can research local organizations like the area agency for aging (a helpful one-stop-shop

for senior services available in many communities), home health providers, senior centers, meal and nutrition programs, transportation services and continuing care retirement communities.

Other great areas to research include\*:

- Social workers
- Mental health services
- Legal counsel
- Financial advisors
- Volunteer centers

\* For more information on these, consult our *Community Resources for Older Adults* handout.

If possible, we recommend conducting research on various services before an issue arises. It's much easier logistically and emotionally to gather information and develop a plan than to be reactive and forced into a last-minute decision during an emergency. Conducting research early, even without telling parents, provides some breathing room to evaluate options. It can also help direct questions and conversations.

When researching living communities, ask about housing options, levels of care, amenities, access for family members and other important factors to help gauge comfort and quality of life. Looking into post-acute recovery facilities can also be enlightening. These temporary housing options provide a safe place for older adults to help with rehabilitation following a fall or surgery.

