Keywords: caregiver, informal caregiver, family caregiver, stress, burnout

Background
Caring for a family member or friend has a huge impact on the caregiver. They are more likely to have depression, be in poor physical health, and are at risk of social isolation and burnout (Ho, Collins, Davis, Doty 2005). It is estimated that one in four Albertans provide unpaid care and coordinate health services for a family member or friend living with illness, disability, or challenges due to aging (Sinha, 2012). Thirty-three percent of caregivers who contacted the Alberta Caregivers Association in 2012 described feeling exhausted.

A common challenge family caregivers identify is that care providers "just don’t understand". Care providers include official system supports such as homecare staff, occupational therapists, doctors, and nurses. Because our health system is patient-focused, the needs of the family caregiver can get overlooked. Currently available resources for family caregivers often focus on improving their caregiving, rather than addressing the possible social, financial, and health impacts on the family caregiver themselves.

With advances in medical care allowing people to live longer, the reliance of our health and social service systems on family caregivers will continue to grow. This can already be seen in the move towards community-based care. In order for our system to continue functioning, more attention needs to be paid to the wellbeing of family caregivers. Otherwise, there will be an increasing number of family members and friends suffering from burnout.

Objectives
The objective of the Caregiver Navigator project was to support family caregivers by increasing the capacity of health professionals and community agency staff to:
1. Identify caregivers early in their caregiving journey
2. Identify and assess caregivers’ needs
3. Support caregivers to adopt preventative self-care practices
4. Facilitate access to resources and referrals

Method
The Caregiver Navigator project involved the development of a one day workshop and program manual for health professionals, service providers and community agency staff. A committee of experts was recruited to refine the concept and develop the materials. A literature review was also conducted to find existing information about caregiver experiences and needs to help develop the workshop materials.

Based on the information gathered, the workshop was developed in five sections:
1. Understand caregiver burden: ‘Caregiver burden’ consists all of the tasks and responsibilities that caregivers fulfill in their caregiving role. This was contrasted with ‘caregiver strain’ which is how difficult the caregiver perceives their role to be. Some caregivers with relatively light burden (few responsibilities) may have very high strain because they don’t have adequate coping mechanisms, resiliency skills, or others to help them.
2. Understand the emotional journey: Participants learned about the complex emotions (for example, guilt, sadness, and anger) associated with caregiving, and were given some insight into how to support a caregiver struggling with these emotions.
3. **Identify and assess caregivers’ needs**: This section discussed the role of assessments in working with and supporting caregivers, including elements of a successful assessment, considerations when selecting an assessment, and a list of some of the most commonly used assessments. The value of ‘discussion starters’ and ‘check-in questions’ were also discussed as a way to conduct informal assessments with family caregivers.

4. **Support caregivers to develop self-care attitudes and practices**: Participants learned about common techniques for helping caregivers improve their own self-care. Barriers to caregivers accepting help and practicing self-care were also discussed.

5. **Plan ahead and connect to resources**: This section discussed how to have supportive interactions with family caregivers and help them plan ahead for the challenges they will face when they are no longer caregiving.

The workshop was delivered in two pilot sessions in January 2013 to a total of 17 participants from across Alberta. Participants completed two evaluations as part of the project: a questionnaire immediately after the workshop and a telephone interview six to eight weeks later.

**Results**
The results of this research suggest there is a need to educate care providers throughout the health and social service systems in Alberta. After completing the workshop, participants reported a better understanding of family caregivers’ perspectives, as well as greater empathy, willingness to listen, and comfort offering support to caregivers. Participants reported that the training manual was very helpful, and many said they had shared it with their coworkers.

A number of themes emerged in the questionnaire responses and during follow up interviews. These included the following:

- Participants felt they needed more resources in order to support caregivers
- Participants reported a better understanding of the scope and challenges of caregiving
- Participants made changes in their practice to better support caregivers
- The training program had personal relevance for participants

**Conclusions**
Care providers are generally aware of caregivers and recognize that the caregiver role can be challenging. However, they are often unsure how to address caregivers’ needs, or balance client care with caregiver support. Training and resources can help care providers identify ways in which they can be supportive. Since caregivers often report not feeling understood by health care professionals, these results suggest that education for care providers may help alleviate some of the stresses caregivers experience and help prevent burnout.

**Lessons Learned**
Many participants indicated that they primarily dealt with caregivers of their clients, and expressed feeling unprepared to support the caregivers. Educating health care providers about assisting caregivers should be included in training curriculum or as professional development. One challenge for health care providers is that many informal caregivers do not identify themselves as such. Therefore, healthcare providers are not able to offer the support they need.

The full report can be found at [www.mentalhealthresearch.ca](http://www.mentalhealthresearch.ca)

**References**


About the Author: Anna Mann is the Executive Director of the Alberta Caregivers Association. In this role, she has lead the development and expansion of caregiver supports throughout Alberta. Anna regularly speaks on topics related to caregiving and has been involved in the development and evaluation of a number of programs including COMPASS, which has been identified as a best practice, and Caregiver Navigator. She has an interest in research and the policy implications of caregiving, and sits on a number of related advisory boards.