

Honoring a Silent Labor Force

America's Labor Day celebrations are underway as I write this piece. It is an annual federal holiday to celebrate the social and economic achievements of workers and their contributions to the strength and prosperity of our nation. Of the 155.7 million workers in the US over the age of 16 who celebrate this day, the largest sector of this acknowledged group of workers - the 4.3 million retail workers in the US - will not get the day off. An *unacknowledged group of laborers* who will also not get the day off are dementia caregivers!

Over 15 million Americans provide unpaid care for a single person with Alzheimer's disease or other type of dementia. They will not be honored because they are invisible to our society. Who are they? These inconspicuous laborers are primarily family members, relatives or a friend who is willing to do the work. They are most likely females (fifty-two years and older) and married. They provide an average of 21.9 hours of direct care per week. The hours are greater (unending in some households) if the person with dementia lives in the home with the caregiver. US economic experts value the care these people provide at \$12.12/hour! That comes to \$265.34 per week and \$13,802.36 per year in unpaid care that is given to each person with Alzheimer's disease or another form of dementia. Please note that some people can live with Alzheimer's disease for up to twenty years!

Why do I bring these facts about dementia caregivers to the attention on my readers?

The answer is simple. Their numbers are growing each year. Their hard work and sacrifices need to be acknowledged publically and honored. As their numbers swell, the unpaid care they provide will become even more significant. Folks, these people are one of our most valuable 'safety nets'. They do make a difference!

Just as we honored those who died in the 9/11 tragedy and those who helped with the recovery process, we took time to honor and pay tribute to the many dogs of the K-9 teams who helped locate the missing people in the Twin Towers rubble. I found those tributes to be very poignant. We understood what 'being a hero' meant. Humans and animals performed feats of courage. They all risked or sacrificed their lives to help others. As I began to think more about this special designation, I realized that dementia caregivers are heroes too.

During a presentation to a group of people in a small church, I spoke about caregivers being real heroes. There were many seniors in the audience. Many of them were men caring for their spouse who had dementia. When I told them they were heroes, they looked at me with shock and surprise. No one had ever said anything like that to them. How could *they* be *heroes* when they were "just doing what came naturally" to them. They were taking care of someone they loved. When I said they were members of a much larger "worldwide group of people" who were doing the same

thing “in silence”, they sat up in their seats. Some mumbled, “I didn’t know that. I thought it was just me out there doing it.”

Hasn’t the time come to let them know they are not alone? How do we honor the valuable work dementia caregivers provide to our residents who are living with some form of dementia? Is there a National Dementia Caregivers Day in our future?

By: Deborah A. Forrest, Ph.D., M.S.N.

www.drdeborahforrest.com

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Speaker, Psychologist, Author