

New Mexico Direct Caregivers Coalition
by Adrienne R. Smith, President and CEO
March 2018

The New Mexico Direct Caregivers Coalition (NMDCC) is a home-grown organization working to enhance and promote family and professional caregivers, supporting their development and advancing direct care issues so they may better serve those who are elderly and those with disabilities.

We started in 2009 with a series of **Listening Sessions** that were held in all regions of New Mexico. These Listening Sessions were paid for by the state Developmental Disabilities Planning Council. The sessions were designed to bring caregivers out of isolation. They were designed to listen to caregivers' concerns about any issue at all.

We did not know what those issues would be--only that they would probably include wages, education and sharing of feelings of isolation. We didn't know who would come to these sessions--would they be caregivers from the workforce? Caregivers of children with developmental disabilities? Much to the credit of DDPC, they also did not presume to know the outcomes of these Listening Sessions.

As we visited Hobbs, Roswell, Artesia, Espanola and other small towns and cities, we heard from caregivers about low wages, no wages, the lack of fringe benefits. We heard about problems with transportation of clients in rural areas. We heard about inadequate on-the-job training--and also caregivers' own lack of education. According to Meriam Jawhar of Santa Fe, "NMDCC's role in bringing awareness to and recognizing the benefits of supporting caregivers in training and certification will provide better opportunities for this growing field." Meriam is a Care Coordinator and an advocate for people with disabilities.

What surprised me most of all was that caregivers' talked about the lack of respect they felt from all except their care recipient about the value of their work. One person attending a Listening Session in Las Vegas, NM said, "I'd one day like to know that someone actually reads the the suggestion I put in the Suggestion Box [at work]."

We created a first Board of Directors from the group of caregivers who attended these sessions. They were representative of all cultures and locations in New Mexico. They were also representative of the ways in which caregivers work: for pay and without pay for a loved one. And they represented the industries of care: some worked for elders, other for people with disabilities, still others for people with behavioral issues requiring care. "One of the reasons I joined the board was to help create an association that works for everyone, not only the paid caregiver but the volunteer caregiver, the person receiving care and the family members, said Ray Benton of Albuquerque. 'No one should feel alone, everyone should be able to live the fullest life possible,' he said. Ray serves as Board Chairman today.

As we began to learn about other organizations in the country, we needed a vision of what we could become. Iowa Caregivers Association, whose executive, Di Findlay, still leads the

organization, said, “Build your leadership. Everything else will follow.” That advice turned out to be essential for our first years and is still so today.

Our first Board of Directors guided our organization’s incorporation, consistently stating that no single voice be allowed to be more important than another voice. For this reason, we created ByLaws that reflect individual, rather than organizational voices, in program and policy development. .

The comments we heard from people attending the sessions served as the basis for our organization. Our first Board stressed the importance of developing programs that should include:

- Education and training opportunities;
- Advocacy for better wages and benefits;
- Opportunities for social and professional networking and
- Advocacy among and between the Creating a unified voice for caregivers in New Mexico and in the United States on issues of importance to their training and professional development.

We started to build programs in the areas above. We had no health policy expertise, only workforce development policy expertise. Where would this idea go?

In the next installment, I will share how we became acquainted with other state and national advocates, including caregivers, employers and care recipients and started to build an identity.

Adrienne R. Smith, MPA, is Founder and President/CEO of New Mexico Direct Caregivers Coalition (NMDCC), a statewide organization that advocates for direct care workers so they may better serve persons who are elderly and those with disabilities. Ms. Smith is an employment and workforce development expert with 20 years’ experience at the state, Federal and international levels. She is a 2016 appointee to the Community Advisory Council of the Federal Reserve Bank Board of Governors. She is a 2014 Fellow of the Aspen Institute. Ms. Smith holds a Masters of Public Policy and Administration from University of Texas at San Antonio and a Nonprofit Management Certificate from Georgetown University in Washington, DC.