

# SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE

December 21, 2021

OPEN FORUM *On Build Back Better's Demise*

## Elder care in U.S. just got harder

By Dave Iverson



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“It’s often said that no one is fully prepared to become a parent, but I think only a few are prepared to care for a parent.”

It was usually around 1 a.m. that the bell would ring, telling me that my elderly mom was headed for the bathroom. And because it wasn’t safe for her to go alone, that meant I was on my way there, too.

I’d moved in with my 95-year-old mom in 2007, when she could no longer live alone. I was a 59-year-old broadcast journalist at the time, hosting the “Friday Forum” program on KQED radio and beginning work on a new film for the PBS “Frontline” series.

My life was full, but flexible. It just made sense, I thought, to move in and help.

But, of course, there was so much I didn't know. I didn't know how exhausted I'd become or how angry I would get. I didn't know the Parkinson's disease I'd recently been diagnosed with would prove less challenging than being a caregiver. I didn't know that I'd be tested in ways I'd never imagined or rewarded in ways I'd never dreamed.

It's often said that no one is fully prepared to become a parent, but I think only a tiny few are prepared to care *for* a parent.

And yet the choice I made is one millions more will soon confront. This country faces an elder care crisis that gets more critical every 8 seconds, with 10,000 Americans turning 65 every day. And we are nowhere close to being ready for that reality.

That's why the decision Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia and 50 Republican senators have made to reject President Biden's Build Back Better plan, and the eldercare funding it provided, is so disappointing, so short-sighted and ultimately so hurtful. That legislation would have helped millions of needy older Americans receive critical home-based services.

Most people think Medicare pays for long-term eldercare. It does not. Medicaid, which assists lower-income Americans, sometimes provides coverage, but largely at long-term care facilities. That's not a reliable plan, not when COVID-19 has already killed at least 184,000 residents and staff of those institutions.

Most people who want to care for an aging parent or spouse at home aren't as lucky as I was.

My parents had purchased a home in Menlo Park in 1950 for \$15,000. Sixty years later, it was worth more just a tad more. That meant I could borrow against the house to hire skilled caregivers while I was at work; I just had to cover nights and weekends. Plus, I could pay them what they were worth.

But even a dozen years ago, that amount of care cost about \$4,500 a month, a sum that would eventually triple by the time my mom needed 24/7 care.

I was lucky. But should luck determine who gets loving care?

That why we must still find a way to help not only those who desperately *need* care, but also those who *provide* it.

According to the Brookings Institution, the median wage for home health and professional care workers in 2019 was under \$12 an hour. And as Ai-jen Poo of the National Domestic Workers Alliance observes, it's not surprising that a profession dominated by women of color often pays less than a living wage.

When I was caring for my mom, I was accompanied by remarkable women, all immigrant Americans, whose constancy, skill and gentle care reminded me of the tender miracle a simple touch can provide.

Until we were under the same roof, I hadn't understood how incredibly demanding that work can be, nor did I fully appreciate the challenges you face when you have to work two jobs to make ends meet. And I didn't understand, at least not in the same intimate way, how life can be different when your name isn't anglicized, when your skin is brown and English is your second or third language.

My care partners brought to America a deep cultural understanding that caring for the old is part of life's bargain.

The next time you hear someone say that those who come to this country need to possess special skills, ask them to think a little more about which skills those are and why they're needed more than others.

My mom lived for another full decade after I moved in before passing away at the age of 105.

Late one night, as we approached our final Christmas together, she turned her head to me and said, "I feel lucky."

And then she said it again: "I feel lucky."

I asked her if she could tell me why. There was a long pause, and then she looked at me with eyes as bright as winter stars and said, "Because there is love all around."

America needs a national care plan that makes loving care possible for all. It's as simple and as important as that.

Being able to ensure your loved ones are treated with tenderness, dignity and respect is not something that should depend on luck, good fortune or politics. It should depend on the kind of nation we want the U.S. to be, a nation that honors both those who need care and those who provide it.

We must all redouble our efforts to make sure our elected representatives in Washington embrace that vision.

*Dave Iverson is the former host of the "Friday Forum" program on KQED, San Francisco and the author of "Winter Stars: An Elderly Mother, an Aging Son and Life's Final Journey," to be published March 22.*