

A Personal Statement In Support of CAPP

Gail Salzman, Resident of Fairfield (Franklin County) VT

Dec 22, 2014

I am speaking as an interested senior citizen of Vermont. My mother is in her 90s, and has lived in a nursing home in St. Albans for nearly 5 years. She has advanced dementia, a disease that she shares with her two sisters. In these years I have witnessed her decline from a lively, intellectually active woman to a confused, mostly non-verbal person completely dependent upon nursing staff for personal care and social interaction.

She resides in one of the highest-rated nursing homes in northern Vermont, with excellent staff and individualized care plan. However, the aides do not have the time or training to provide the kind of personalized activities that might help bring her out of her isolation.

A year ago I read about a project called Music & Memory, initially started by a social worker in a NYC nursing home -- perhaps you've heard of it. It involves trained staff creating personalized music play-lists on iPods for earphone listening by residents with dementia. I thought it was worth a try with Mom, as she has always loved music.

Her response was immediate. A moment after I put her earphones on, she sat up straighter, her eyes opened wide, and she began to beat time to the music with her hand and foot. She started humming, smiling, laughing, and commenting on the beautiful sounds. Most astounding of all, after I took the earphones off, she started chattering in whole coherent sentences. Her alert, happy mood and increased verbalization lasted for an hour or so. I now do this with her as often as I can, but I can't be there every day. My mother and so many residents like her would benefit greatly from extra trained staff who could implement individualized programs such as Music & Memory, and others. I have seen it work.

It's not a cure for dementia. But clearly music that is individually programmed does trigger memories and feelings of well-being, and could be used to increase the quality of life of residents with dementia, their family and their caregivers.

Music & Memory program has now spread across the country. The states of Wisconsin, Ohio, and Utah, having success with their own pilot projects, are now introducing it as policy, to be implemented in all nursing homes across their states.

This is just one example of the high quality person-centered care that can be provided by the trained Companion Aides in the pilot project. As a state we must establish practices in long-term nursing that will better serve the population who live with dementia. Well-designed pilot projects are a sensible way to begin. I feel strongly that this one should be enthusiastically supported and funded by Vermont.