

Lifesharing pairs disabled with host families to help them become independent

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Start Page: B.1

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Life is a lot different now for Marie Giasson. She's spending time with friends, volunteering in the community and still gushing over having her own room.

It's a far cry from just over a year ago when the 40-year-old lived in a nursing home.

"I had to share a room with different roommates," Giasson said. "All anyone did was sit around and eat. I couldn't go anywhere."

Now Giasson's life is stable, she's more independent and she's not trapped in an assisted-living facility, said Sheila Davison, director of Access Services' Schuylkill and Carbon region. Giasson is a client in the nonprofit organization's Lifesharing program, which pairs individuals who have developmental disabilities -- and in many cases, whose families can no longer care for them -- with host families or individuals.

Through Lifesharing, clients enjoy the benefits of nurturing homes with hosts who have been trained to provide support and personalized long-term care. Providers earn an extra income -- and less money comes out of the state social services' budget since Lifesharing can cost substantially less than nursing or group homes.

About 20 people in Schuylkill and Carbon counties are enrolled in Lifesharing, including Giasson; Maria Strobe, who stays with Lori Stauffer, Zion Grove; and Brian Applegate, who lives with Scott Locher, Mahanoy City. Davison said more providers are needed.

Giasson, who grew up in foster care, is with Lifesharing provider Margaret Schock, Tamaqua. The two, like all in the program, met beforehand to make sure they'd be a good match. They clicked almost immediately.

A typical day starts with Schock going to her job and Giasson getting picked up for Access Services' LIFE Day program.

"All the clients attend the day program, go to school or go to work," Davison said. "The neat thing is that providers can still have jobs."

After the two return home, Schock or Giasson will prepare dinner. From there, Giasson will often spend time in her room -- a place she says she "loves" -- and make crafts, watch television or clip recipes.

Davison explained that Lifesharing offers more independence than a group home or nursing home does.

"Here, they're not so isolated. They're involved in the community," Davison said. "Marie now knows her neighbors. She's really become integrated in the community. And all of Margaret's friends are now Marie's friends."

While Giasson has no family, parents caring for adult children with disabilities often look to the Lifesharing program.

"Maybe mom or dad has had a heart attack and wants to make arrangements for the future," Davison said.

On the other hand, some individuals with developmental disabilities don't want to live with their parents forever, and look to Lifesharing for some freedom.

That's the case with Strobe, who's lived with Stauffer for four years. Stauffer said the program gave Strobe the independence she craved. It also meant a flexible schedule for Stauffer, something that was a blessing when her three children were young.

"It allowed me to raise my family. I didn't miss out on anything with them," said Stauffer, who has provided Lifesharing for a dozen years.

And although Strobe stays in contact with her family, she has become a part of the Stauffer family.

"She comes along for anything we're doing. She enjoys it," Stauffer said. "She calls my kids her brothers and sister and she is really proud of each of them."

Lifesharing isn't for everyone, Stauffer said, and she's happy to have support from Access Services.

"There is fun. There's stress. There's crying. There's laughing. There's anything you'd expect to have in your family," she said. "But if there is a problem, Access is there for you. You're not on your own."

Access Services helps throughout the process, from making compatible matches, providing training and visiting the caregiver and client for support.

Through it all, Stauffer said the benefits outweigh the negatives.

"It does add a lot to your family. You learn so much about yourself, what you've got, your strengths and your weaknesses. You learn a lot from the client. They teach you so much about understanding and patience," she said.

Providers receive a tax-free \$1,350 each month, and can be married, single, and own or rent their homes. Davison said Lifesharing saves taxpayers money since care for each client costs about \$30,000 annually. Nursing or group homes can cost up to \$150,000.

Anyone interested in learning more about the Lifesharing program should visit www.accessservices.org or call 366-1154.

As for Locher, he said he's happy to know he's helping to make someone's life easier.

"You just have to be in it for the love of people, and not for the money," he said.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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