

Here's a grand salute to personal support workers

Personal support workers are being saluted this week.

Formerly called health care aides, home support workers and homemakers, personal support workers (PSWs) have a new title that underscores their vital importance to many vulnerable citizens of all ages in the community, said Mary Buzzell, a spokesperson for the Victorian Order of Nurses program.

Mostly women, PSWs help bring hope to the lives of many

who are struggling to remain at home — their chosen place, she said.

"For many, PSWs are their only friends, their only help, Ms Buzzell said. "PSWs can influence a person's decision — that of wanting to live or to give up."

The clients that the PSWs see are varied in need and personality, she added.

Madge is 96. Her only son lives in Singapore. She has a number of chronic health concerns — arthritis, which has left her hands nearly useless, loss of sight in her right eye and difficulty, at times, with swallowing as a result of mini-strokes.

Fred is 89. He's doing his best to care for his wife who has cancer. Their only daughter helps whenever possible but, she works full time to support her family and contributes financially to the care of her granddaughter, who is mentally challenged.

Martha is a young mother. Her son, one of four children, has cerebral palsy. She cares for her son alone most of the time, as her husband travels for business.

Too often the skills, talents and interpersonal strengths of PSWs go unnoticed and unrecognized yet they are the cement of caring for families like those in our communities, said Ms Buzzell.

"I have witnessed their expertise, their caring and concern for my mother and for myself for over six years. My mother, age 94, is very frail and unable to bathe, dress, walk or eat by herself. Strokes have robbed her of much of her recent memory. Many nights she is sleepless, which takes its toll on her and on me.

"Yet, despite the losses she has experienced, she is happy according to her words and with good spirit. My friends are now her friends as she is the only survivor in our family. She lights up when 'my girls', her term for our team of PSWs, come."

Among the things they bring are caring, continuity, courage, hope, knowing, patience and keen dedication, Ms Buzzell said.


Care in the home involves a myriad of important tasks to lighten the family members' load. Besides providing personal care, PSWs also do laundry, light housekeeping, meal preparation and provide family with rest periods and time for themselves.

To become PSWs, students enroll in a community college where theory and practical experiences are learned. The shortage of PSWs is currently extensive due to increased need, Ms Buzzell said. "An opportunity to enjoy a career like no other exists now."



Photo by GRAHAM PAINE

A personal support worker, formally called a Homemaker, Joan Lambrick props up a pillow for patient Rhoda McPhee. Personal support workers are being officially recognized for their tireless efforts this week.



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