

Geriatric Hero: Achieving Independence

By Aaron Cobb, RN

Fourteen years of geriatric nursing did not fully prepare me for my new job. For years, I had become accustomed to taking care of those who could not care for themselves. When I began working with Kentucky Transitions, I initially had to have a paradigm shift in my thought process. The same population of individuals that I once cared for in a facility setting, I was now responsible for attempting to remove from the nursing home in order for them to live on their own.

When I first met Sarah at the nursing home, I was not very optimistic that she would ever be able to live on her own. How would I possibly be able to move a blind diabetic, who was receiving dialysis and had a stage 2 pressure ulcer on her coccyx, from the nursing home into her own home? To make matters worse, not all of Sarah's family was in favor of her leaving the nursing home. She only had one sister who supported her decision of leaving the safety of twenty-four hour care. Sarah and I both knew the road we were embarking on was paved with hurdles standing between her and independent living.

Sarah's vision impairment was one of the first obstacles that we cleared. We were able to obtain assistive devices that allowed her to check her blood sugar. The talking glucometer allowed her to easily keep track of her blood sugar, enabling Sarah to know how high or low her levels were at the time of the finger stick. The glucometer was also able to be downloaded so that she could take a list of her blood glucose readings along with her to physician appointments. We were also able to obtain a talking mediset that allowed her to take her medications independently.

The pressure ulcer on Sarah's coccyx had been an ongoing issue since she was first admitted to the nursing home. I had Sarah set up with skilled nursing care at the time of her discharge. She was also receiving treatment from the wound care clinic while in the nursing home. Caring for her ulcer in the community became a collaborative effort between the wound care clinic recommending treatment options and home health providing dressing changes based on those recommendations.

Providing all of Sarah's personal care needs was a daunting task in itself, requiring a combination of creative thinking and negotiation skills. Through the Consumer Directed Option, we were able to hire a company to provide Sarah's personal care and home making needs. I was able to get Sarah approved for six hours of daily personal care and home making, but I knew she would benefit most by receiving both morning and afternoon care, rather than having

someone there continuously for six hours. Through my negotiations with the company president, Sarah was eventually approved to receive her care in two three-hour increments, which allowed a caregiver to assist her with both morning and afternoon needs. With Sarah receiving dialysis three days a week, she needed to have a caregiver at her apartment to assist her in getting ready for appointments. The caregiver would have to be at her home an hour before their normal shift began. By working with the company, they were able to meet this need. Now Sarah could be up, dressed, and ready for the bus on dialysis days.

The day of transition brought a mix of emotions. I was excited that Sarah would finally be able to experience the opportunity and pleasure of living independently. I was also scared that I was potentially setting her up to fail. What if I had not done enough planning? Or what if I failed to recognize a barrier for her to be able to live on her own? I had set her apartment up, equipped with everything she would need to begin her new life. But was it enough? As we left the nursing home, the reality of what we were doing set in. On the drive to Sarah's apartment, panic and second guessing myself nearly consumed me. How was she going to know where everything in her apartment was located? What if she got hungry through the night? Please let this be the right decision. I hoped. I prayed.

As Sarah arrived in her new home, the look of excitement on her face put me at ease, erasing any concerns I'd had. After orienting her to her apartment, in no time, she was able to wheel herself over to her recliner and hopped in. She told me it was like Christmas time for her. The smile on Sarah's face and the joy in her voice made every challenge we'd faced a distant memory. It had all been worth it as I left Sarah that day, knowing her journey from a nursing home resident to living her life fully and independently was a success. It has now been almost two years since her transition, and Sarah continues functioning and enjoying independent living in her own home.