



**OTSEGO COUNTY COMMISSION ON AGING**



Submitted by  
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RESEARCH &  
VOLUNTEER  
COORDINATOR

*We Help.  
We Care*

120 Grandview Blvd., Gaylord, Michigan 49735

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**JOHN PANCI, OCCOA ADVOCACY ASSISTANT COORDINATOR, MMAP COUNSELOR, AND PARKINSON SUPPORT GROUP FACILITATOR**

## Parkinson Support Group offers education and support!

Community member Terry French is one of 1.5 million people in this country living with Parkinson disease. His wife, Faith, estimates he was living with the disease for two years before he was finally diagnosed twelve years ago. At that time, there were not a lot of resources in Otsego County that specifically addressed Parkinson's and it was hard to connect with others who were facing the many challenges caused by the disease's symptoms. "When Terry was first diagnosed, we went to Traverse City to learn more about the Parkinson's," Faith recalls.

### What is Parkinson disease?

According to the National Parkinson Foundation website, [www.parkinson.org](http://www.parkinson.org), Parkinson disease is a brain disorder that occurs when dopamine-producing cells in a certain part of the brain die. The dopamine these cells produce ensures smooth muscle coordination. When too many of the cells die, the people who are affected can develop muscle tremors, slowed movements, stiffness, and balancing difficulties. Other signs of Parkinson's can include small, cramped handwriting; stiff facial expressions; soft, muffled speech; a shuffling walk, depression, and, in some cases, dementia.

### Otsego County's Parkinson Support Group was established in 2003!

Through the many older adult clients it was serving, the Otsego County Commission on Aging (OCCOA) became aware that a sizeable number of them were living with Parkinson's and in need of information and support, so in October 2003 it officially established a Parkinson Support Group. Funded by the OCCOA, the group meets monthly and is dedicated to providing information and support to those living with Parkinson's, as well as their care partners. Each meeting addresses a different topic relevant to the disease, and some include guest speakers. There is always a refreshment break and plenty of time for discussion and information sharing.

The Frenches are long-time members of the group, joining not long after it was established. Faith notes that for her and Terry, the educational component of the meeting is very helpful. She notes, "There are so many facets of this disease, and everyone is affected differently." She reflects, "Attending these meetings helps us to stay informed and have a more complete picture of the disease. We also have learned about symptoms to look out for as the disease progresses." Faith notes that the medications being prescribed by doctors to help manage Parkinson's symptoms are an especially important topic of discussion for group members. She explains, "We talk about the various medication side effects that have been experienced. In our conversations, we have also discovered that various doctors prescribe the medications differently. This awareness helps us to better know what questions and concerns we should bring to our doctors."

### The group belongs to the participants!

Two OCCOA staff members are present during the monthly Parkinson Support Group meetings. OCCOA Advocacy Assistant Coordinator and MMAP Counselor John Panci facilitates the meetings, while OCCOA Medical Resources Coordinator Pam Carlson, RN, provides her medical expertise. She is also available to answer questions and provide referrals. Carlson and Panci, along with OCCOA Executive Director Dona Wishart, make up the Parkinson Support Group Planning Team.

Carlson notes, "Although the agency provides sponsorship and organization for the group, it really belongs to the members. They provide input for many of our meeting topics, and discussion time is centered on their current personal concerns and challenges."

### New members welcome!

Both Panci and Carlson emphasize that the group is always open to new members and can be a great source of help and comfort to those newly diagnosed with Parkinson's, as well as to their care partners. Panci, who has been the facilitator for the group for almost two years, recalls, "I remember the group's willingness to accept me coming in after they had been an established group. They were all very warm and welcoming." He reflects, "I greatly appreciate the camaraderie the group enjoys and admire the sense of humor they keep in dealing with some pretty weighty issues." Panci also appreciates their honesty, noting, "The members talk openly about their personal issues and physical and emotional challenges. When someone in the group shares a difficult issue they are facing, the support from the group is heartwarming." He adds, "They treat everyone with dignity and really do care and try to support each other."

Carlson notes, "When people are first diagnosed with Parkinson's, they can experience a wide array of emotions... confusion, frustration, uncertainty, bitterness, and even anger. By coming to the meetings, they can be with people who have experienced similar emotions, but who have learned how to manage their symptoms, which has helped them improve their outlook and attitudes." Carlson emphasizes, "It is important for new people to join the group. They have the opportunity to enrich it, as a whole, and everyone benefits. By bringing their experiences to the group, all can draw comfort from knowing that they are not alone, plus, they have opportunity to help others facing similar circumstances and to bring each other hope." She concludes, "The members focus on what they can do, rather on what they can't do. When you join this group, you'll find lots of fun, fellowship, support, helpful information, and a great lift for the day!"

**THE PARKINSON SUPPORT GROUP MEETS AT THE UNIVERSITY CENTER GAYLORD ON THE FOURTH THURSDAY OF THE MONTH, FROM 2:30 TO 4:30 P.M. THE NEXT MEETING IS SCHEDULED ON AUGUST 22ND. NEW MEMBERS ARE ALWAYS WELCOME! TO LEARN MORE, CALL 732-1122 OR LOG ONTO OUR WEBSITE, [WWW.OTSEGOCOUNTYCOA.ORG](http://WWW.OTSEGOCOUNTYCOA.ORG).**



**PAM CARLSON, RN, OCCOA MEDICAL RESOURCES COORDINATOR AND PARKINSON SUPPORT GROUP MEDICAL ADVISOR**

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