How to Choose an Elder Mediator

Tips on finding someone to help your family navigate thorny caregiving issues

by Christina Ianzito, AARP

Caregiving is complicated. Mediation can help solve conflicts.

Adult siblings often find themselves at odds when a parent needs long-term care or nears the end of life. They may argue about a range of emotionally charged caregiving issues: Should the parent move in with one of the children or to assisted living? Is driving becoming too dangerous for Mom or Dad? Which child should become the parent’s medical or financial proxy?
Sometimes these disputes are bitter enough to break families apart. In such cases it can be a tremendous help to have an objective professional in the room — someone to lower the temperature, ask appropriate questions and find common ground. Such people are called eldercare mediators, family mediators or adult family mediators.

When successful, the mediator’s work can help avoid a costly legal battle and keep the family united — or at least on speaking terms. You may need this assistance only briefly, to help your family come to consensus on a care plan, for example, or long term if problems are complex and deep-seated. (For serious money disputes, you may end up needing an attorney.)

“As a mediator, your job is to help people think in new ways about how they can solve the problem themselves, so when they leave everybody is on board,” says Arline Kardasis, a mediator with Elder Decisions, an adult family mediation and mediation training firm in Norwood, Mass.

Steve Erickson, a family mediator in Bloomington, Minn., characterizes successful mediation as “getting the people attacking the problem rather than each other.”

To find a good mediator, it’s always best to get a referral. Kardasis says many clients are referred to her by health professionals, hospital social workers, clergy or other people in the community. You can also search the Academy of Professional Family Mediators directory.

Next step: determining if the mediator is right for your family.

**Questions to ask before hiring an eldercare mediator:**

**What is your background?** There are no universally accepted credentials or professional standards for eldercare mediators; some have advanced degrees in law, social work, psychology or counseling. Inquire about their training and area of focus. Kardasis says mediators should be trained in conflict resolution, the key to a successful mediation. Ask how long they’ve been in the field and whether they do this full time.

**What is your approach?** Find out what you can expect if you hire this person. Many skilled mediators will prepare for mediation by first determining the main issues and making sure the right people are at the table. Kardasis, for instance, will speak by phone with each person involved to hear their concerns and goals. “Our job is to make sure everybody in the room knows we’re impartial,” she says.

If family members are traveling from out of town, the group may gather for an intensive half- or full-day session. If travel isn’t an issue, a few shorter sessions may be more effective. Mediation ends, ideally, with a written agreement. (Kardasis calls it “a memorandum of understanding.”)

**Will our discussion be confidential?** Confirm that the privacy of the conversation is protected so you are able to speak freely. Laws vary by state, so ask the potential mediator how it works where you live. “You want to be sure that the mediator can’t be subpoenaed after the mediation is over if the issue goes to court,” Kardasis says.
**What is your fee?** The cost can be as low as $175 an hour, but many mediators charge $250 to $350 an hour, and some may charge much more. You might pay $2,000 to $3,000 for an intensive four-hour session, says Kardasis, but the time needed depends on the complexity of the problems. (Sometimes the question of who should pay for the mediator becomes a new issue, unfortunately.) Some families may need more time if they’re unraveling many years of distrust.

The process may sound like a lot of money and work, but it is often well worth it for people who care about maintaining or rebuilding familial bonds, Erickson says. “Families are longing for peace.”