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Staff photo by Erica Benson

Villa Park resident (sitting) Pam Tulley discusses future financial options with her caregiver (left) Willie Mae Fitchou and Aabcore agency members Christina Nuqui and Kristin Barthels. Tulley became an Aabcore client after she suffered a brain injury during a car accident.

Aabcore: born of compassion

Agency celebrates 10 years of supporting those who have suffered brain injuries

By Patti Murphy ⁰⁹⁸
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Pamela Tulley wants to get one thing straight.

"People think that traumatic brain injury means you don't have a brain," said the Villa Park woman. "That's not true. It's just that your brain needs to be re-trained."

A 1996 car accident left Tulley in a 10-month coma. Her awakening was something of a miracle, but it came with its own price. She suffered significant frontal damage in the crash, and the injury would be responsible for a lifetime of short-term memory loss and depression.

Tulley has devised a method of coping with what she terms her "invisible disease" by littering her home from one end to the other with notepads and calendars filled with written reminders.

"Nobody wants to just exist; they want to grow," she said.

Tulley's home life changed dramatically following her coma. In addition to surgeries and speech therapy, the courts ordered a guardian to help her with daily living.

1.4 million Americans suffer a traumatic brain injury every year
50,000 injuries lead to death.

The leading causes of brain injury are as follows:

- Falls (28 percent)
- Motor vehicle accidents (20 percent)
- Struck by/against object (20 percent)
- Assaults (10 percent)

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

It was through her guardian that Tulley first learned about Aabcore, a case management agency specifically for those with traumatic brain injury, and met Ahmed Basith, president and co-founder of the company.

"I started with Aabcore, which was a little business at the time, and they helped me get a personal assistant," Tulley said.

When Tulley needed yardwork done, she found someone through Aabcore case

managers, who all have backgrounds in social work. They helped her find transportation when she decided her driving days were over. Emotional support is another big part of the company.

"They've always been there to offer a shoulder for me to cry on and someone to listen," Tulley said. "They can be whatever I need them to be."

Aabcore, 7702 S. Cass Ave., Suite 115, Darien, a private business that receives funds from the Illinois Department of Human Services' Division of Rehabilitation Services, is celebrating 10 years of service. Basith and Judi Davey, vice president, registered the company as a home health agency.

And while traumatic brain injury has become the focus of Basith's professional life, it first made an impact in his personal one.

"When my brother was 9 years old, he fell off the roof," he said. "One day my family called to tell me my brother had passed away from a cerebral aneurysm."

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Then Basith's 16-year-old nephew died of brain injury from an automobile accident.

"The intensity of the need for the brain injury population is so great," he said.

Aabcore serves customers who have acquired brain injuries because of strokes, aneurysms, tumors, substance or alcohol abuse, and injuries resulting from accidents, falls or assault. A customer's assets — excluding the value of their home and car — must not exceed \$17,500, and they must be approved by Medicaid to receive Aabcore's services.

"We help people with the application and the documentation that is required," said Basith, noting that once someone is a customer in the Aabcore network, they never have to pay for any services. "None of our customers have health insurance, barring two or three people here or there. We don't have a waiting list here. People never wait."

Cases are split up among 22 hands-on managers who travel throughout Cook, DuPage, Lake, McHenry, Kane, Kendall, Will, Grundy and DeKalb counties to perform initial assessments and do follow-ups every six months.



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Staff photo by Erica Benson

Villa Park resident Pam Tulley receives assistance from her caregiver, Wille Mae Fitchau. Tulley found Fitchau through Aabcore, an agency that helps people with brain injuries.

"We look at everything," said Kristin Barthels, a case manager for the last four years. "We go out and explain the program and what we can do to help them. We help them with Medicaid and state forms and

ask them their history, about different hospitals they've been to and therapies they've had. We also go over acts of daily living like eating, cooking, dressing, transferring, and see where they need help."

The organization provides its 1,600 customers a long list of resources, like personal assistants and homemakers to help with cooking, cleaning and in-home care. Four neurophyschologists and seven behavioral counselors also are on staff to help customers improve cognitive functioning and provide therapy.

"Neurophyschologists work to understand individual strengths and weaknesses in terms of learning new skills and abilities," Davey said. "They determine factors that support the prevention of regression. Yearly evaluations can include finger tapping, hand-eye coordination and verbal tests. Their reports are not made in finite terms, but they recognize a person's improvement and make further recommendations."

Psychological treatment varies from person to person, but counselors can help individuals disabled by a brain injury work through their frustration, anger and depression, Basith said.

"We believe in giving options to people," he continued. "We let them decide what they want to do and where they want to go."

In all, Aabcore has been a godsend for Tulley.

"They've taught me to be independent," she said. "I'm not afraid of talking about my brain injury, about how difficult it can be, but how it can be overcome."