It is that time of year again – the leaves are changing colors, the weather is cooling off and Thanksgiving is on the horizon. This season is all about being thankful, so it is only fitting that November is National Family Caregivers Month. This month is focused on recognizing, honoring and thanking those who provide care for someone who is aging, disabled or chronically ill.

A family caregiver is anyone who helps take care of a family member or friend without any professional training. Nationally, it is estimated more than 43.5 million Americans provide care for a loved one. Closer to home, more than half a million Oklahomans are providing 488 million hours of care each year. Alarmingly, at least 42 percent do not know who to contact if there is a problem.

Kristopher Struckmeyer, Oklahoma State University Cooperative Extension caregiving specialist, said caregiving is not easy, but no one needs to go it alone.

"Asking for help can be hard, especially when you feel you're the only one supposed provide help," Struckmeyer said. "Caregiving comes with obligation and guilt. Obligation in the sense that 'it's what families do for each other.' Guilt in that your loved one does not get a break from their condition, so you don't deserve a break, either."

One of the biggest concerns with caregiving is burnout. The caregiver becomes emotionally burdened or may be overwhelmed by their responsibilities. This can negatively impact the caregiver's health – and can result in greater risk for cardiovascular diseases, depression and social isolation. Burnout puts the caregiver and person receiving care (PRC) at risk for injury, possibly resulting in the PRC being prematurely placed in a long-term care facility.

As a caregiver, it is your job to advocate for your loved one, but it is also important that you advocate for yourself.

So, what can be done?

“Caregivers typically are not alone in providing care – just struggle with tapping into their own resources," Struckmeyer said. "The best way to access these resources is to have a family meeting."

Sit down with the PRC and discuss the tasks with which they want help. Caregivers have a tendency to want to help the PRC as much as possible, but everyone wants their independence. Be sure you empower your loved one, not imprison them.

Once you have an idea about what needs to be done, gather everyone together and have a conversation. Have a list prepared and let people volunteer for what they would like to do.

Another tip is to keep a running list of tasks you need done such as laundry, yard work or possibly dinner one night because you will get home later than expected. This list will help you stay organized as family members finish tasks and want more to do.

“Family caregivers are invaluable to our society. They fill a gap in our medical system. National Family Caregiver Month is a great way to shine light on everything caregivers do for their loved ones," Struckmeyer said. "But let’s not forget caregivers the rest of the year. Thank a family caregiver and show your appreciation as often as you can and step in to assist when possible.”