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Article: Decreasing – or Even Stopping – Unwanted Mail

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This story by ABC Dementia Caregiving Insight Contributor Carol Hillegas illustrates the issues behind the piles of mail older adults often have to deal with, and offers some great suggestions on how to deal with it effectively.

In the beginning, I knew my aunt was struggling with modern life. She had owned a computer years before. It was a hand-me-down from her son...or would that be a hand-me-up?

She never really mastered anything other than basic emails. I doubt she had spent much, or any, time surfing the internet. But that machine had pooped out on her some time ago.

I always said, "THANK GOD she doesn't have a computer!" Or any other smart device.

She could get herself into the most creative and amazing situations with just telephone calls and snail mail. What the heck could she have gotten into on the internet?

I was helping her just a little bit from afar. About 1200 miles and several states away. She still lived in the town I grew up in. Independence, Missouri – home of Harry S Truman.

Then I got “the call” from a woman who has become my dear friend. She was a close school friend of my aunt’s deceased daughter and had started checking in periodically with my aunt.

The call. The call that changed my life. Consumed it. The call that probably saved my aunt from... bankruptcy and poverty and (more) heartbreak.

She sounded terrified and was in tears.

“Carol! Something is really wrong! I’ve come across all kinds of mail in her house that’s worrying. It’s all sketchy and scammy, and oh my gosh, she’s filled in all her personal and financial information and was ready to mail some of it in!”

My heart sinks. My brain goes into “fix it” mode. What can I do to make this better?

Turns out, my aunt had already been sending these mailings in. Lots of them. And doing much the same on incoming scam phone calls. She fell for everything. She had no barriers up. She trusted everyone. “Why would anyone want to hurt me or steal from me?” she would ask me countless times during the next few years. AAARRRGGGHHH!

Scammers Held More Sway Than Family

There was no way to stop her. She continued to fall for all of it. No matter what any of us said. And she had created a situation that other caregivers or family of older people may recognize instantly. She had responded to so many mail solicitations, her incoming mail was unbelievably huge every single day. The mail carrier must have hated her!

Solicitations for products. For magazine subscriptions. And most troublesome and difficult to deal with...for political donations, and donations to worthy charities and nonprofits. Some of them worthy, yes. Some of them probably not so much.

By the time I got deeply involved, she had unpaid bills, collection notices, and had bounced oh, so many checks. “I always pay my bills on time! Except when I don’t have the money.” she would tell me. And yet, she regularly sent \$5 and \$10 donation checks to literally EVERY solicitation coming in the mail or by phone call. And you know what that means. Over time her name got out there to the fundraising world and she got solicitations from familiar reputable charities, and organizations I couldn’t even find online alike.

“It’s just \$5 Carol! I can afford that!”

No, no you really can’t.

I was already named as her Durable Power of Attorney, but there had been no reason for me to get involved in any way. But with this development, she agreed to let me pay her bills online and help her with money and budgeting. In getting the lay of the land early on, I added up all the donation checks she had made in the last 12 months. It was more than \$1,600. I know for some seniors, that amount would look like getting off easy.

But I was shocked. So was she when I told her. "Oh my! I don't think it could be that much. Could it?"

But over time, I did manage to solve that problem. At least 99% of it. How did I do it?

USPS Informed Delivery Saves the Day

It took thinking, sleuthing, and time. At first, it was an hour or so a day. It diminished over time until it was just an occasional, maybe weekly few minutes.

First, I got her permission to sign up for Informed Delivery on the USPS website. I could see most of her incoming mail each morning. Turns out that bothered her that I could see it all, but she didn't ask me to stop. I could now see what solicitations were coming in.

I began my email campaign. Using an email address for doing her business (again, with her permission), when I saw an offer or solicitation come in her mail, I found their email address online, and I requested they remove her from their mailing list. If they didn't display an email address, I did an online "Contact Us" submission.

Over time I developed a script I used and copied and pasted it in, which saved tons of time. If you're interested, here is the wording I used:

Subject Line: Remove me from all mailing lists

Please immediately and permanently remove me from ALL mailing lists and ALL lists you sell or share with other organizations.

Aunt's Name (exactly as it appears on their mailing)

Aunt's Mailing Address (again, exactly as it appears on their mailing)

Thank you.

And it worked! Usually, I would get a return email confirming they had removed her. Soon, I could actually see the volume of incoming mail was getting a little less all the time. Finally, there were only a few per week, and then even less!

Honestly, the most difficult to get to stop mailing were the political parties and campaigns. One side was very much more persistent than the other. I won't say which.

She had been an equal opportunity donator to both sides and issues, which baffled and, honestly, kind of amused me. But I was persistent, and eventually even those solicitations ended. Whew!

My aunt occasionally complained a bit. "I hardly get any mail at all anymore," she would tell me sadly.

I realized that her mail had been filling some needs for her. It dawned on me that opening and reading her mail was something she looked forward to, especially once I had the bills coming to me via email and she didn't have the stress of that when she reached in her mailbox.

I believe it was her entertainment, a way to pass the time, and that she felt like she was "doing her business" when she filled forms in or wrote a check and mailed them back.

She also was a genuinely generous and sympathetic soul who loved feeling like she was making a difference.

Some will say I should have just had her mail stopped or forwarded. We did consider that, and actually did that during times she was in the hospital or skilled nursing rehab for any length of time. But did you know, not all mail gets forwarded? I didn't at that point but learned. She also was still very much against not getting her own mail at her home. I did what I could with her permission at that point.

When she complained about there being no mail, she didn't seem to make the connection that I might be causing it to happen. I didn't remind her she had agreed to my plan before. I knew she would fight me and start insisting she could handle it. I knew that I was protecting her. And that was what mattered most.

By **Carol Hillegas**, ABC Dementia Caregiving Insight Contributor

Like many caregivers, Carol started just helping out a bit. Soon she realized she was spending hours each day fulfilling needs and solving problems. A freelance copywriter by trade, Carol uses the lessons she's learned along the way helping great organizations communicate how their products and services ease the way for seniors and caregivers. Find out more about Carol at [Liberty Copy](#) and [LinkedIn](#).
