

[The personal touch](#)



The largest donation ever by an individual, Edward M. Dowd, will mean hands-on help for more people with advanced MS.

by Vicky Umland

By any measure, Ed Dowd has led a successful life. After a childhood in Salinas, California, service in the Air Force and a bachelor's degree from Santa Clara University (SCU), he embarked on a fruitful career in investment real estate and finance. He was a founder of San Jose National Bank and Commerce Savings and Loan in Sacramento, California. In 1981, he founded EMD Properties, which today owns and operates about 1,000 residential rental units in the San Francisco Bay area. Dowd also gives back to his community, a practice he began in the early '80s when he served on SCU's Board of Fellows, as vice chairman of the California State Athletic Commission and as the state's representative to the 1984 Summer Olympics.

And yet, Dowd says one of the best things that has ever happened to him was being diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1993, when he was 47 years old. Living with MS has spurred Dowd to slow down and re-evaluate his priorities. Prior to his diagnosis, Dowd worked 12-hour days, seven days a week. But as his disease progressed, that schedule became too demanding. "I went to a cane and then to a crutch, to a walker and to a wheelchair. I think at the crutch part I began to realize that I couldn't continue like I had been, and I had to change my focus," he says. "So rather than running my business, I started looking at what [else] I could do—and not focusing on what I couldn't do."

Dowd realized one of those things was improving people's lives through philanthropy. But not

just any type of philanthropy. “I don’t want to [just] give my money; I want to make a difference,” he says. “So I look for participation in organizations where an infusion of capital can make a meaningful impact for them.”

One of those organizations is the National MS Society. Earlier this year, Dowd gave the Society a multiyear donation of \$3 million—the largest gift the Society has ever received from an individual.

Dowd’s gift establishes the Edward M. Dowd Personal Advocate Program, which provides extra assistance to thousands of people nationwide who are living with the most complex challenges of MS.

“I have the caregivers, the assistants, the safety net for me, but that safety net is often not available to other people,” Dowd says. “I want everybody to have the same enjoyment of life that I have, but they need that safety net.”

The Edward M. Dowd Personal Advocate Program aims to increase independent living capabilities and quality of life for people affected by MS whose health and safety are compromised by limited knowledge, understanding or ability to access programs and benefits.

“This life-changing gift will accelerate the collective and individual ability of people affected by MS to live their best lives—[and to be] connected, solution-focused and resilient,” says Society President and CEO Cyndi Zagieboylo.

Between 2016 and 2018, the program will triple the number of people nationwide who receive personalized case-management services. Lisa Custy, a Society vice president of MS Navigator services, says individuals in need of these services are identified by:

- Multiple, urgent issues, including disability or significant changes in physical or mental health;
- Inability of family or caregivers to provide care;
- Being homebound, living alone, or other health or safety risks;
- Lack of adequate housing or other vital services;
- Inability to identify needs; and
- Imminent potential of admission to a long-term care facility.

Individuals who may benefit from the Edward M. Dowd Personal Advocate Program are identified when they connect with an MS Navigator.

Program participants will work with personal advocate providers in their region who have backgrounds in social work, counseling or related disciplines. These providers, who act as personal supportive care partners, help participants or their caregivers develop plans that address their goals. These may include accessing benefits and entitlements, finding adequate housing and appropriate medical care, improving home safety and achieving financial

stability. Then the providers help participants connect with the appropriate resources and agencies to achieve their goals. Even after the goals are accomplished, the Society continues to be a supportive partner throughout the individual's MS journey.

The art of living well

Dowd's other philanthropic efforts include a range of gifts—many of which incorporate the love of art he developed after his MS diagnosis. He gave \$4.1 million to the Palo Alto Medical Foundation's Mountain View campus, where Dowd receives treatment, for a new entry pavilion, which has as its centerpiece an original glass sculpture by American artist Dale Chihuly. Dowd's goal was to provide an uplifting element to the lives of people waiting for medical procedures. He also gave \$12 million toward the construction of the Edward M. Dowd Art and History building at his alma mater, SCU, which also has an original glass Chihuly sculpture as the centerpiece of its atrium.

Dowd plans to take a hands-on approach with the Edward M. Dowd Personal Advocate Program to ensure it truly makes a difference in the lives of the people it's designed to help. He says the impetus behind his funding of the program is to give hope to individuals who, like him, live with advanced-stage MS.

"I want them to be able to rely on the Society to guide them and show them how to have the best life they can," he says. "There is help out there, and you just have to know that it's there and access it. I think this program will make a difference and will change a lot of people's views about the choices and opportunities available to them in the future."

Vicky Uhland is a freelance writer and editor in Lafayette, Colorado.

To find out if the program is right for you, call an MS Navigator at 1-800-344-4867 or email ContactUSNMSS@nmss.org.