



## Families Facing Alzheimer's Don't Have To Go It Alone

A tragedy in Seal Beach spotlights the importance of communities resources to help families cope with Alzheimer's.

Roy Charles and Clara Laird missed their 70th anniversary by one month. Clara died November 21, allegedly shot by her husband of 69 years as she lay in bed at the Country Villa Health Care Center in Seal Beach. She was in the end stages of Alzheimer's disease, bed bound, no longer able to recognize her husband, and unable to sit up or feed or care for herself.

She had been suffering from Alzheimer's for five years, during which her husband provided what family and friends described as daily, devoted care until he reluctantly placed her in the care facility three months before her death. Roy Charles Laird was in court Friday, charged with one count of murder and discharging a firearm, and a potential sentence of 50 years to life. He is 88. Clara Laird's death cast a stark spotlight on the dilemma faced by families who are caring for loved ones with late-stage dementia.



Credit AP Photographer Tsafir Abayov

"People are overwhelmed," said Ellie Nixon, who facilitates three support groups for families of Alzheimer's patients in Orange County as a volunteer for the Alzheimer's Association. "They often don't realize that resources and help are available, and don't know where to begin."

Nixon urges family members to seek out a support group through the [Orange County Chapter of the Alzheimer's Association](#) as a critical first step in getting help. The support groups allow people to benefit from the experience and expertise of others in similar situations, she said.

"That way, they don't have to reinvent the wheel," said Nixon.

A geriatric care manager can also provide support, Nixon said. Trained in nursing, gerontology, social work, or psychology, with emphasis on issues related to aging and elder care, a geriatric care manager can help in assessing older adults, determining their needs, and assisting families in finding support and care.

However, "Anyone can call themselves a geriatric care manager," Nixon cautioned.

She recommends finding a geriatric care manager through the [National Association of Professional Geriatric Care Managers](#) to ensure that anyone a family hires for this role is properly trained and screened.

Adult day care is another option for patients and families dealing with Alzheimer's. Activities in the adult day care setting include exercises, games, arts and crafts, music, social interaction, and other pursuits to provide stimulation for the person with Alzheimer's and much-needed time off for caregivers.

"We have two excellent adult day care centers in Orange County, [Acacia Adult Day Services](#) in Garden Grove and [Alzheimer's Family Services](#) in Newport Beach," said Nixon.

Sometimes caregivers need more than a day of relief from caregiving, Nixon noted. "They may need to go somewhere out of town to attend a wedding, or may need a break before they have a breakdown themselves," she said.

Respite care is available from assisted living facilities that have special programs for people with dementia, such as [Autumn Years](#) in Costa Mesa, [Silverado Senior Living](#) in Costa Mesa and [Quaker Gardens Senior Living](#) in Stanton.

It's important to arrange for respite care well in advance, as the availability may be limited. There is no minimum stay for respite care at Autumn Years or Silverado Senior Living, but Quaker Gardens has a seven-day minimum stay. Without long-term care insurance, the patient or family member pays the cost of respite care, which can range from \$155 to \$200 per day.

Although support is available, family members who are caring for a loved one with dementia are often reluctant to seek help. Psychological and practical barriers keep people from getting the help they need, said Cordula Dick-Muehlke, Ph.D., executive director of Alzheimer's Family Services.

"Alzheimer's disease lasts a very long time and can be very expensive. People worry that they won't be able to afford care, but there are affordable options," she said.

Caregivers often believe they should be able to provide all the care themselves, and feel as if they are abandoning their loved one if they reach out for help, said Dick-Muehlke. "The research shows that caregivers compromise their own mental and physical health when they overextend themselves. They develop depression, get the flu more often, get colds more often, or develop more serious illnesses."

And families are often under the mistaken impression that their choices are starkly drawn between caring for a loved one at home or placement in a nursing home.

"The most important thing for families to understand is that nursing homes are the very last option in the cycle of care available for people with Alzheimer's," said Ellie Nixon.

Keeping someone with severe dementia at home not only places heavy demands on caregivers, but also may not provide enough stimulation for the person with memory loss.

"Sometimes there isn't a lot going on at home, and the person is watching TV a lot," Dick-Muehlke observed. "It's really great to be in a therapeutic environment with stimulation."

Jennifer Wagner of Huntington Beach was trying to care for her mother on her own in her home. Her mother, 82, was diagnosed with Alzheimer's in 2005.

"At home she would get very irritated," Wagner said.

Agitation and restlessness can be common in people with Alzheimer's.

"She would get up and go to the restroom a thousand times," Wagner said. As her mother's Alzheimer's has progressed, she no longer recognized any of her six children, Wagner said, even when they are with her.

Her mother now goes to Acacia Adult Day Services four days a week. Wagner said her mother is much calmer now, and has fewer behavioral problems.

"She likes being around people. She loves the social life," Wagner said.

Making the decision to get help for her mother didn't come easily, Wagner said. "I felt guilty and frustrated."

Now she advises others who have relatives with Alzheimer's not to feel guilty about seeking support. "I tell people now, 'Do the best you can, but if you're stressed out, you can't help anybody.'" She added, "You can't take care of your loved one if you don't take care of yourself."

#### **Support groups for family members caring for loved ones with Alzheimer's:**

- Los Alamitos Caregiver Support Los Alamitos: 2nd Friday of the month, 12:30 p.m. - 2:00 p.m., St. Hedwig Church. Contact: Beryl Henry 562.243.1118
- Seal Beach: 2nd Tuesday of the month, 6:00 p.m.-7:30 p.m., Sunrise of Seal Beach, Contact: Ellie Nixon 714.642.9458
- Seal Beach: 4th Tuesday of the month, 10:00 a.m.-11:30 a.m., Leisure World, Contact: Terri Furlow 562.795.6278