

# S.D. DEVICE TRACKS ALZHEIMER'S PATIENTS

County program to offer 100 residents use of new gadget

BY PAUL SISSON

Daniel Baker of Rancho Bernardo has been wearing a device about the size of a garage door opener around his neck since shortly after he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in 2014.

The 82-year-old retiree who once owned several barbecue restaurants in East County said he feels a certain peace of mind about having the item on him at all times, even though he knows it tracks his every move.

"I think it's of benefit to me and my family. ... With this, they could track me and find me ... I take advantage of everything I can still comprehend," Baker said.

In 2015, leaders of the San Diego County Sheriff's Department and the nonprofit group Alzheimer's San Diego spotted the device around Baker's neck while promoting the region's new Take Me Home Registry. In the conversations that ensued, they learned that the tracker also offers two-way communication with a 24/7 call center.

The gadget, from the San Diego-based company GreatCall, has eventually given rise to a new pilot program. Last week, county Supervisor Greg Cox led his fellow supervisors in unanimously allocating \$10,000 to buy the "Splash" device for 100 local residents diagnosed with Alzheimer's or other forms of dementia.

Mary Ball, president of Alzheimer's San Diego, said wandering is a significant problem in this population of patients.

"Studies tells us that six out of 10 people with Alzheimer's will wander. This is something that families need to pay attention to," Ball said.

She added that while some might think they have no need to monitor a loved one who has dementia, the reality is that nobody can be vigilant 24 hours a day.

"Caregivers sometimes will tell us, 'It won't happen to me because they are always with me 24 hours a day.' But sometimes, for example, a person with Alzheimer's



Daniel Baker, an Alzheimer's patient, with his longtime companion Barbara Christensen. He wears a tracking device called "Splash" that uses satellite GPS and cellphone technology.



Daniel Baker holds his "Splash" gadget, which can also be used to call for help with the push of a button.

will get up in the middle of the night, think they're going to the bathroom and walk right out the front door," Ball said.

The Splash, so named because it is waterproof and can be worn in the shower, uses a built-in cellphone on

the Verizon network that allows an instant response inside and outside the home.

Barbara Christensen, Baker's significant other for more than 20 years, said she has found the device — hanging from a lanyard around his neck — to be lib-

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Barbara Christensen • Companion of man with Alzheimer's disease

erating.

"It has given me freedom," she said. "I feel comfortable going to the grocery store because I know that he can push the button and get ahold of me."

The tracker generally costs \$50 upfront, plus \$20 to \$35 per month for service. Higher-priced plans include additional features such as fall detection and access to a smartphone app that can show the wearer's real-time location on caregivers' smartphones and immediately notifies them of low battery levels and any calls

made to the company's urgent-response service.

Initially known for its senior-focused Jitterbug flip phone, GreatCall is charging the county \$100 per person for the Splash device and three months of its top-line service, which would usually cost a total of \$155.

Jeff Polizzotto, the company's vice president of connected health, said his team is working on a discounted service package for those in the county's pilot program.

"If we can figure out a way to save lives by bringing a very inexpensive technology to

this market, that is something, from a mission perspective, that we are very passionate about," Polizzotto said.

In San Diego County, the potential consequences of dementia-related wandering became starkly public in 2014 when 75-year-old Sally Estabrook, who had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's, disappeared from a Julian campground. Her body was found in heavy brush about a half mile away from the Pinezanita RV Park, where she was camping with her family.

The tragedy spawned the county's Take Me Home Registry in 2015. That program, run by the San Diego County Sheriff's Department, keeps a directory of photographs and contact information for people with disabilities such as autism, dementia, Alzheimer's disease, Down syndrome, deafness and other developmental disorders.

To sign up with the registry, go to [sdsheriff.net/tmh](http://sdsheriff.net/tmh) or call the San Diego Regional Center at (858) 576-2966.

Even for Baker and other patients who use an automated tracking device, the county still recommends joining the registry so all local law-enforcement agencies will have accurate information in the event of an incident.

Lt. Mike Knobbe, the point person for the Sheriff's Department's Alzheimer's support services, said it is unclear how many times local law enforcement ends up searching for residents with memory loss who wander from home. He explained that 911 dispatchers file those cases in the broader category of "missing persons" in the computer system used to manage emergency service operations.

He also said the department is exploring the technical feasibility of adding a category for Alzheimer's and other memory-related illnesses to make it possible to precisely gauge how often wandering occurs.

For more information on the Wandering Prevention pilot program, visit [alzsd.org](http://alzsd.org) or call (858) 492-4400.

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## New CEO steps in to successfully rescue another pension system



DAN McSWAIN

It's election season, so we're hearing plenty about lousy leadership and dysfunctional government, generally along with a promise the next candidate will do

better.

In reality, true government reform is rare. Yet hope occasionally is rewarded.

For proof that success is possible, we need look no further than David Wescoe, a lawyer by training who recently completed his first year as chief executive of the San Diego County Employees Retirement Association.

If the name sounds familiar, Wescoe in the late 2000s rehabilitated the operations and reputation of San Diego's municipal pension system, after the city had earned its "Enron-by-the-sea" slur by lying to bondholders, diverting contributions and spending the system to near-insolvency. Five city pension officials were indicted.

Amazingly, Wescoe has surpassed himself at the county's system.

One reason, in my view, was a higher degree of difficulty posed by the second turnaround. While the city's retirement board had melted down and been rebuilt, its investment management wasn't dysfunctional.

The challenges were broader with San Diego County. When Wescoe arrived a year ago, the overall pension system was arguably the nation's worst managed, from end to end.

At more than \$100 million a year, its investment cost as a percentage of assets was among the highest of any public plan.

Worse, the system's outsourced chief investment officer, Lee Partridge of Salient Partners, had loaded its portfolio with leverage — a form of borrowing — to buy derivatives, swaps and other arcane financial instruments. By late summer of 2014, the risk had grown so much that an extraordinary crash could have wiped out the county's entire \$10 billion nest egg, and left taxpayers owing billions more.

Standing idly by was the system's previous chief executive, Brian White, who had held the job since the Clinton era. His main distinction was to say as little as possible in board meetings and

avoid interaction with employees and the public.

Along with investment management, the county's system had punted command of its legal work to an outside general counsel. Instead of cutting costs and raising quality, the net effect of such outsourcing was to raise spending and shift responsibility away from White, because both positions reported directly to the system's part-time board, as did the chief executive.

Speaking of the governing board, its members were divided and confused. Two threatened to sue each other, at county expense.

Let's pause here to note that Wescoe waded into this mess willingly, leaving a promising private-sector job to do so. He appears to view public service as a duty and an honor, rather than a sinecure.

Results seem to matter to him, too.

"The accomplishments are unprecedented," said Dianne Jacob, a county supervisor and pension board member, on March 17 after Wescoe reported on the system's progress during his first 12 months.

The litany begins with Wescoe's hiring of Stephen Sexauer as chief investment officer, replacing the outside consultants with a talented in-house executive. It's far too soon to judge returns, but as of March 31 the fund's value had declined by 1.3 percent since the fiscal year began July 1, nearly even with the 1.2 percent decline in its investment benchmark.

On the bright side, the system already has cut \$14 million in annual costs from its investment operation.

And Sexauer moved with balletic precision to reduce risk in the portfolio. Over two weeks in August, he carefully dismantled elaborate bets on everything from the price of zinc to global currencies, replacing swaps and derivatives with cheap index funds.

"We were literally able to move 1,400 market positions at 15 worldwide exchanges around the world, error-free and at low cost," Sexauer told me this month.

Now the portfolio has no direct leverage. Roughly 25 percent is invested in bonds; 44 percent in stocks; 23 percent in private equity and real estate; and 8 percent is "opportunistic," basically waiting to pounce on deals when prices crash in various foreign or domestic financial markets.



David Wescoe is chief executive of the San Diego County Employees Retirement Association.

The investment mix reflects an understanding that nobody can reliably predict market behavior, so diversifying the portfolio can cushion downturns and avoid missing big upward movements.

To be sure, the consultant, Partridge, understood this, too. His mistake was to depend on leverage to goose returns, a strategy that multiplied risk as well as consequences.

As Sexauer was pulling the portfolio off the railroad tracks, Wescoe was busy overhauling the system's management.

For members who call with retirement questions, the average waiting time has declined from three minutes to 20 seconds. I know what you're thinking: I'd be delighted if my cable company only kept me waiting for three minutes on hold.

But monopoly-style service was unacceptable to the new chief executive. So he encouraged the call center to cut steps from the voicemail system and get callers to a live person more quickly.

Wescoe, whose resume includes counsel to commissioners at the Securities and Exchange Commission, also replaced outsourcing with an in-house general counsel, gaining tighter control and boosting output of legal work without raising costs.

A big obstacle for would-be reformers in government is the job-for-life mentality that can afflict workers backed by unions and civil-service protections.

Through a mysterious combination of personality, enthusiasm and wisdom, Wescoe appears to have found ways to encourage incumbent employees to higher levels of service, often by promoting some and moving others to

different departments or adjusting responsibilities.

"My experience is this: Good people like a challenge," Wescoe said.

This has been no minor overhaul, as 28 of 32 people on the system's management team were either hired, promoted or realigned over the last year. Whereas succession planning was weak a year ago, today the system is at least two experienced people deep in key departments.

Improvements are in evidence almost anywhere you look.

A complex transition to a new technology system is nearly complete. In one of several organizational changes, Wescoe moved responsibility for disability claims, which had been managed separately, under supervision of the general counsel.

Communication with the press and public is vastly better. The system has beefed up and expanded retirement seminars for members. The latest annual report is clear and easy to read.

Sexauer, Wescoe and company overhauled the pension fund's investment policy statement, a giant undertaking akin to writing a constitution. Now the board has a fighting chance to actually understand how the public's \$10 billion is being invested, and prevent excessive risk-taking.

My favorite line in the document: "An investment program need not be complex to be successful."

Speaking of the pension board, there's been a profound shift from dissension to harmony. Meetings that once stretched past quitting time now take two or three hours.

In a very real sense, the board's members have been the architects

of their success. In particular, credit goes to Jacob, county Treasurer Dan McAllister and Samantha Begovich (a deputy district attorney representing county workers), who pushed for reform.

In the ordinary course of events, staying awake is a chief challenge of service on a pension board. Since 2014, this board has voted to fire its entire outside investment and legal team and, later, accepted its chief executive's resignation — and hired Wescoe.

The biggest remaining problem is one the board can't solve. Like nearly all public pensions in California, the county's is gravely underfunded. Today's retirees are enjoying benefits at the expense of tomorrow's taxpayers. The problem can only get worse until the county's elected supervisors find the political courage their pension board has displayed.

As for Wescoe, he has hit bumps along the way. Late last year, workers struggling with the old technology came close to missing a deadline for producing the system's actuarial valuation, a key report card on the pension fund's financial health.

And he's undoubtedly made some enemies, both internal and external, given the pace of change.

If Wescoe is eager to admit shortcomings, he is equally quick to distribute praise and credit. If you ask him how he succeeds, you'll get an earful about all the great stuff his managers and staff members are doing.

Another thing: In a culture that worships "innovation," I can't think of a single aspect of Wescoe's management style that is innovative, or even new.

Instead, his talent lies in deploying old-fashioned ideas about focusing on customers, helping workers succeed, and keeping institutional promises. Most of all, he eats his own cooking, as the saying goes.

"I believe in public service," Wescoe said. "And I believe in the power of government to do good."

Business-school academics debate whether chief executives matter much. When researchers follow the trajectories of many private companies, it's hard to tell whether success or failure owes more to any particular leader or just plain luck.

In the case of the San Diego County Employees Retirement Association, it's the public that at last has gotten lucky.

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