

'We wouldn't have put my dad there'

Family says loved one did not receive proper care

BY PAUL SISSON

Bill Wright helped many during his career of fighting fires, but his family alleges that he did not get the same kind of consideration during a two-month stay at Elmcroft of La Mesa in 2015.

Wright died at the facility on Sept. 21. His widow, Nancy Wright, and son Bill Wright Jr. said he was denied the palliative care measures that should have eased his passing.

"Instead of dying in comfort and peace, this guy suffered the last few hours of his life, which is not right for anybody but especially somebody who was a public servant and served the community his whole life," Bill Wright Jr. said. "He went out of his way to take care of people, and that's the way he died."

Elmcroft Senior Living, a company that runs Elmcroft facilities including the one in La Mesa, declined to discuss the Wright case in detail, citing "each resident's right to privacy." It did say that "Elmcroft of La Mesa takes all allegations seriously, and is investigating these current allegations raised by this family."

The La Mesa site is under scrutiny by the state Department of Social Services, which has threatened to revoke its operating license due to a string of violent incidents between residents who suffer from dementia. Those altercations occurred in early 2015, a few months before Bill Wright was admitted.

Nancy Wright said she tried her hardest to find the right memory-care center for her husband. The process included asking friends and family for advice on where to place him when his Alzheimer's disease made her "afraid he would go out the

front door and I wouldn't be able to find him."

Elmcroft of La Mesa, she said, was highly recommended and seemed to compare favorably to the four other communities she visited. She sold the family home so she could afford to pay the facility's \$4,200 monthly fee for her husband's stay.

Wright said her husband suffered several falls after moving in and that at one point, she witnessed several staff members dragging him from a common area into a hallway where she later discovered him laying in the fetal position.

She said she decided not to file a complaint with the state, although Elmcroft's director said she could, because she feared the facility's staff would retaliate against her husband.

"You don't know what goes on there at nighttime, so I didn't do it," Nancy Wright said.

Reflecting on the experience, both mother and son said they did not necessarily believe that most of the caregivers at Elmcroft of La Mesa were uncaring. But there didn't seem to be enough workers to handle even simple tasks like making sure all residents were able to eat the food they were given at mealtimes, they said.

For other families trying to choose an appropriate assisted-living, memory-care or other comparable facility for a loved one, Bill Wright Jr. said it pays to thoroughly check state records. Had he seen the file for Elmcroft of La Mesa, he said, he would have made sure his mother made a different decision.

"We wouldn't have put my dad there," he said.

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Bill Wright Jr.



PHOTO COURTESY OF NANCY WRIGHT

Bill Wright served as chief of the National City Fire Department in the late 1970s.

Alzheimer's warnings

Editor's note: We asked Mary Ball, executive director of Alzheimer's San Diego, to discuss her nonprofit organization's experiences with dementia and violence. Here are her thoughts:

The unfortunate situation at Elmcroft of La Mesa highlights a taboo topic: the violent and aggressive behavior that can sometimes accompany Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia.

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Mary Ball • executive director of Alzheimer's San Diego

Too many people mistakenly write this disease off as one that is just about forgetting names and places, when in reality it is a disease that comes with a laundry list of challenging behav-

iors, sometimes including violence.

More than 80 percent of people with dementia are cared for at home by family members for the entirety of the disease — often leaving spouses and adult children isolated and ill-prepared to keep themselves and their loved one safe.

At Alzheimer's San Diego, we are committed to helping families impacted by Alzheimer's and dementia because until a treatment or cure is found, no family should have to live with Alzheimer's alone.

Just recently, one of our social workers took a call from a woman who was at the end of her rope and frankly had become terrified of her husband, who is suffering from dementia.

The woman explained that her husband had begun "to grab her" to the point that her arms

were now covered in bruises. She went on to say that her husband "had not always been this way, but as his dementia worsened, so did his aggression."

Our specially trained social worker listened patiently, taking down a complete history and reassuring the woman she had done the right thing by asking for help. In too many cases, caregivers put aside their emotional and physical well-being in order to continue caring for a family member.

Because this situation had clearly escalated to the point where we felt the caregiver was in physical danger, we let her know that we wanted to report the situation to Adult Protective Services and the police. The wife agreed that she needed help.

When the police arrived later that day, the officer found the woman's arms covered in black-and-blue hand prints, just as she had described. When questioned about the bruises, the husband readily admitted to causing them and, due to his dementia, he couldn't understand the gravity of the situation.

Quickly, their adult son was called. He had no idea about the extent of his father's behavior and what his mother was going through on a daily basis. Through an in-person family meeting, we helped to guide them on how to identify triggers and how to manage these difficult behaviors. We also arranged for additional support in the home, including respite care.

More than one-third of people living with dementia will act aggressively toward others, but it may not be for the reasons you might assume.

When it comes to dementia, behaviors are often a form of communication. In situations like this, it is important to uncover the reasons behind the aggression. Is the person with dementia in pain or discomfort? Were there any recent changes to medications? Are they able to recognize their loved one or do they see them as a stranger in the house who might harm them?

These are complicated situations that often require understanding, patience and additional support.

If you are caring for someone with dementia and are struggling or need help, call us or come see us.

What you should know

Assisted-living and memory-care centers are not medical facilities. They are residential sites meant for people who need help with the tasks of day-to-day living but do not require significant medical assistance, such as a feeding tube or treatment for severe bedsores.

Know your legal rights concerning these facilities. They include the right to live in a safe environment, receive visitors and have all costs and benefits laid out in a clear and understandable contract.

If you or a loved one experiences care that you think is inadequate, call the state Department of Social Services at (844) 538-8766.

You can find inspection reports for many facilities by visiting the state's enforcement website at bit.ly/DSSreports. In San Diego, you can also review a facility's file by going to the department's Mission Valley office at 7575 Metropolitan Drive, Suite 109.

The National Center for Assisted Living recommends visiting facilities at different times of day and talking not only with administrators and staff, but also residents.

Bring a checklist on your visits because it can be difficult to remember everything that needs verification. Several organizations, including the National Center for Assisted Living and California Advocates for Nursing Home Reform, publish checklists that provide a methodical way of making sure all questions are addressed before consumers pick a facility.

Don't sign any contracts on site. Several assisted-living and long-term-care groups advise against signing an administrative agreement with a facility right away. They urge potential residents and their family members to take such documents home and evaluate them thoroughly.

If you are considering memory care for a loved one with dementia, find out if the facility has 24/7 nursing care. Also ask how many staff members per resident are provided during the day and at night. More staff generally means better supervision.

Ask about anti-psychotic medication. Facilities should use these drugs only as a last resort. Your loved one's doctor should consider other causes of difficult behavior, like undiagnosed medical conditions, before prescribing anti-psychotics.

