

“We often come across caregivers who don’t identify themselves as caregivers. Caregivers tell themselves, ‘Of course I’m going to take care of my husband, of course I’m going to take care of my mother...’”

Martha Rañón • director of education and outreach for the Southern Caregiver Resource Center (shown below)

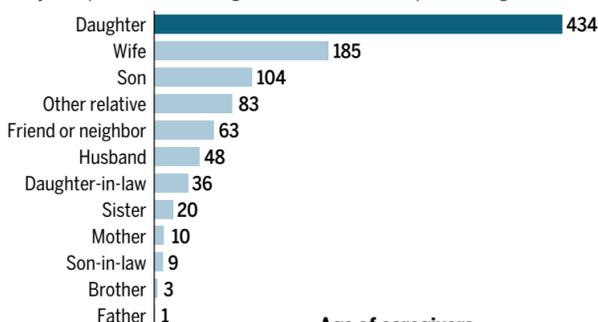


Caregiver demographics

The following statistics represent a snapshot from July 1, 2013, to June 30, 2014, of 996 San Diego County caregivers as compiled by the Southern Caregiver Resource Center. The center said while the data are from one year, they are consistent with what has been collected over the past 28 years.

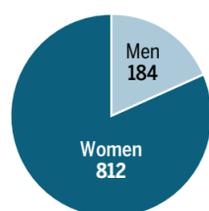
Caregivers relationship to care recipient

Forty-four percent of the caregivers were the care recipient’s daughter.



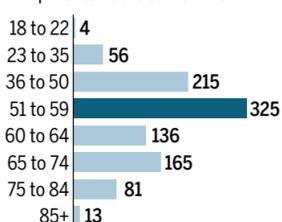
Gender of caregivers

Women made up 82 percent of the caregivers in the report ...



Age of caregivers

... and the largest number are in the “sandwich generation,” likely to be caring for their children and parents at the same time.*



*The age of two caregivers was unknown.

Living arrangement

Sixty-six percent of the caregivers in the report lived with the care recipient.**



**One caller was the care recipient and the living situation of six people was unknown.

Source: Southern Caregiver Resource Center

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“Caregivers tell themselves, ‘Of course I’m going to take care of my husband, of course I’m going to take care of my mother. That’s my mother, that’s what I do,’” Rañón said.

And that’s what happened to Rañón in 2009, when she was pregnant with her first child and working full-time for then-Assemblyman Marty Block.

Caregiving crept up on her slowly, just as the realization did that her late Aunt Guadalupe had dementia.

“I wasn’t too familiar with the symptoms. I thought she was just being stubborn,” Rañón recalled with a chuckle.

She brought her Tia Lupe to live with her and her husband, but overseeing her aunt’s care started taking an increasing amount of time, and Rañón found herself in a squeeze, running errands before and after work, even on her lunch hour.

“My husband was working, too, and I couldn’t quit my job. What could I do?” she said.

She turned to Southern Caregivers and had an “aha” moment that, now as its education director, she helps other reach: “OK, I’m a caregiver, now what?”

If a loved one has a disease, Rañón and other experts recommend that caregivers find out as much as they can about it so they know what to expect and can get help. And one of the key things caregivers should do, Rañón said, is to get help by setting up a network of family, friends and service agencies to stave off caregiver burnout.

“You can’t do it alone,” she said, “because you have no idea what’s coming down the road.”

‘In their world’

Alford Claiborne was a 20-something-year-old sailor when he met Rita, a tall, gregarious schoolteacher, in Houston. He was scrappy; she was a former sorority girl; and theirs was a classic case of opposites attracting, he said. They were married in 1971 and went on to have three children, Alicia, Reggie and Sean.

Alford, who retired as a master chief in the Navy in 1991, had served in Vietnam and was later stationed at Naval Air Station Point Mugu in Ventura County, which brought the family to Southern California.

After moving to San Diego, Alford got a job as a county probation officer and Rita worked as high school science teacher.

Alford and Rita loved to travel and over the years they’d crisscross the country as Alford successfully worked toward his goal of running a marathon in all 50 states,

But things started to change in 2001 when Rita became forgetful and started having mood swings. A friend and fellow teacher of Rita’s told Alford his wife should see a doctor because she was doing strange things at work. Rita was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s, which triggered an automatic revocation of her driver’s license.

Losing her job and her independence seemed to hit Rita harder than her diagnosis, Alford said, and he was in denial about how sick she was until he came home one day and saw her sitting in front of the TV.

“It was a blank screen, the TV wasn’t even on,” he remembered, “and then I realized that I couldn’t leave her alone anymore.”

When he first took on the role of her primary caregiver, Alford Claiborne was still thinking like a husband. If Rita was tired, he’d let her sleep, even if it was all day. But that led to Rita getting dehydrated and not taking her medication at the right time, so he set up a schedule that he sticks to years later.

“I’m not a nurse. What did I know?” he said.

Thirteen years later, Alford has learned a lot about what he didn’t know.

Like how to cook full, balanced meals. His famous backyard barbecue dishes were not going to sustain him or Rita. Like how to build a network. His daughter, Alicia, also a San Diego County probation officer, regularly helps with her mother’s care and sometimes Rita’s friend from school or Alford’s sister from Texas will give him a much-needed break.

Like how to seek outside services. He’s become a regular at both Alzheimer’s Association and Southern Caregiver Resource Center classes and support groups.

Like how to not try to reason with Rita, even when she wants something unreasonable.

“From the classes, I learned they’re always right, don’t argue, get into their world as much as you can,” he said, letting out a heavy sigh. “I’m in their world, believe me.”

Alford said he doesn’t think Rita knows anymore that he’s her husband, but she knows he’s her primary caregiver.

“Whenever I’m away for a while she’ll ask, ‘Where is he?’” Earlier this year, Claiborne was honored with a Courage & Hope Award by the Alzheimer’s Association at a gala fundraiser at the U.S. Grant Hotel in San Diego. His fellow honorees were UC San Diego neuroscientist researcher Dr. William Mobley, Scripps neurologist and medical director Dr. Michael Lobatz and San Diego County Sheriff Bill Gore.

Politicians, philanthropists and elite members of the scientific community joined to give Claiborne a standing ovation for his years as a “Selfless Caregiver and Alzheimer’s Ambassador.”

Waiting for his car at the valet after the gala, he couldn’t take another step and plopped down hard on a bench.

“I’m tired. I didn’t get my nap today,” he said, with a weak smile.

“I had to prepare Rita so I could go out. And this is not usually what I do on a Tuesday night.”

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Alford and Rita Claiborne have been married for 43 years; Alford has been a full-time caregiver to his wife for the past 13. NELVIN C. CEPEDA • U-T PHOTOS

Getting help

San Diego County’s Aging and Independent Services: Part of the Health and Human Services Agency, a clearinghouse for information on a variety of aging issues, including family caregiving support and adult day care programs. Call (800) 510-2020 or go to sandiegocounty.gov/hhsa/programs/ais.

The Southern Caregiver Resource Center: Serves 30,000 caregivers in San Diego a year at no charge, making it the largest organization of its kind. The center assigns consultants who assess needs, draw up caregiving action plans and arrange for services, from respite care, to meals, transportation, elder-proofing a home and more. Dozens of classes and support groups are held each month, with outreach programs for military and Hispanic caregivers. Call (800) 827-1008 or go to caregivercenter.org.

Disease-specific organizations: Provide varying levels of support. The Alzheimer’s Association’s San Diego chapter, for example, offers at least 10 free services for caregivers, including a new respite care program, a 24/7 helpline — (800) 272-3900 — plus support groups and classes on everything from legal planning to how to communicate with people who have Alzheimer’s. Call (858) 492-4400 or go to alz.org/sandiego.

The Elder Law & Advocacy organization: Gives caregivers free and low-cost legal assistance as well as Medicare-related counseling, services referrals and community education. Call (858) 565-1392 or go to seniorlaw-sd.org.

Home modifications: San Diego County caregivers can request free or low-cost minor modifications, such as the installation of hand rails, grab bars, smoke detectors and handheld shower heads, from two nonprofit organizations. The central, south and east parts of the county are served by JFS Fix-it, (858) 637-3040; bit.ly/1vxXAe2. North areas are served by Interfaith Community Services, (760) 489-6380; interfaithservices.org/our-programs/senior-services.