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By Elizabeth Regan
 ereg@norwichbulletin.com (860) 425-4256

[Print Page](#)

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Day centers aid caregivers

Lisa Houser, of Jewett City, has two full-time jobs as a caregiver: through one, she brings in a paycheck, and through the other, she is able to keep her aging father home where he belongs.

Houser works as an attendant at Sheltering Arms, a residential facility for elderly clients operated by United Community and Family Services in Norwich. It was through her job that she first heard about Ross Adult Day Center, a drop-off program for those older than 60 that operates in the basement level of Sheltering Arms.

She now brings her father, Bob Couillard, to the day center about twice a week — as an opportunity for him to socialize with others and as a source of security for her while she's working or running errands. Couillard, 76, was diagnosed with dementia in 2005, about five years before his wife died after a long illness.

Houser had cared for her mother as well, so she knew what to expect; but knowing doesn't always make it easier.

Caregiving may start with driving a loved one to the doctor or helping with household chores, but progress to hands-on care, such as bathing. Increasingly, family members are handling tasks once left to nurses, such as the care of open wounds or injections of medication.

Houser said she does a lot of those types of nursing tasks for her father because it's too expensive to have someone else come in.

Contrary to popular belief, Medicare doesn't pay for the most common types of long-term care — and last year, a bipartisan commission appointed by Congress couldn't agree on how to finance those services, either. But an Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research poll found nearly 6 in 10 Americans 40 and older support some type of government-administered long-term care insurance program, a 7-point increase from last year's AP survey.

The poll also found broad support for a range of policy proposals:

- n More than three-fourths favor tax breaks to encourage saving for long-term care or for purchasing long-term care insurance. Only a third favor a requirement to purchase such coverage.

- n Some 8 in 10 want more access to community services that help the elderly live independently.

- n More than 70 percent support respite care programs for family caregivers and letting people take time off work or adjust their schedules to accommodate caregiving.

The tug on the sandwich generation — middle-aged people caring for children and older parents, often while holding down a job — has been well-documented, and the new poll found half of all caregivers report the experience caused stress in the family.

Anne Hunter, the adult day care administrator at Pierce Memorial Baptist Home in Brooklyn, said the stress can be extreme.

"You're trying to deal with Alzheimer's or a dementia situation and you're also dealing with kids who could be in school who are trying to go to athletic activities or have a social life of their own. So you're caring for both sides of your family," she said.

It's a situation that Houser knows well. She has a 6-year-old son, Austin, as well as a grown child who has moved out of the house. She said Austin has never gone a day without seeing his grandfather, which is good for both of them.

Programs like the ones at Ross Adult Day Center and Pierce Memorial Baptist Home — the only two such programs in New London and Windham counties with membership in the Connecticut Association of Adult Day Centers — lessen the squeeze on the sandwich generation and allow them to enjoy their time together more fully.

"I know my father is safe. He's enjoying his life," she said. "When he comes home, he's so talkative. He's like a little kid going to school."

It's also a source of consistency in the midst of a disease that offers little stability. Houser described her father's memory and level of engagement this way: "You have good days and bad days, and you don't know which it will be when you wake up in the morning."

Even on the bad days, Couillard feels the safety of his daytime community. "They're good to me over here," he said.

The AP-NORC Center survey was conducted by telephone March 13 to April 23 among a random national sample of 1,419 adults age 40 or older, with funding from the SCAN Foundation. Results for the full survey have a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 3.6 percentage points.

— *The Associated Press contributed to this story.*



Lisa Houser and her father, Bob Couillard, of Jewett City. Houser is the primary caregiver for her father, who has dementia. He spends a few days a week at the Ross Adult Day Center in Norwich. Elizabeth Regan/ NorwichBulletin.com