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AGING & independence

COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES AGENCY
AGING & INDEPENDENCE SERVICES

"More Rewards Than Challenges": A Kinship Caregiving Journey

By Jennifer Bransford-Koons
Director, Aging & Independence Services

Life doesn't always go as planned. When Jeani Naylor, 67, turned 60, she was gearing up for retirement after years of working as a registered nurse. Little did she know the birth of a little girl would change everything.

Jeani's granddaughter, Valerie, had a difficult start to life. Her birth parents had been using drugs and Valerie was exposed in utero. She was born with a disorder that caused her brain to grow outside of her skull, which required surgery. As Valerie's birth parents were not able to safely care for her, she initially entered the foster care system. Ultimately, Jeani and her husband, George, stepped in to raise her.

Jeani with her granddaughter, Valerie

About 2.5 million children in the U.S. are growing up in kinship families—being raised by grandparents, other relatives, or close family friends when their parents cannot care for them. There are many reasons kinship families form. The circumstances leading to kinship care arrangements can happen to any family regardless of their age, race, wealth, or education. The parents may have died suddenly, or they may be unable to parent because they have substance use disorder, are in prison, have been deployed in the military, or were deported or detained.

When Valerie was 7 months old, Jeani and her husband assumed responsibility for her and set out on the path to adopt her. Jeani and George are among the thousands of kinship caregivers raising children throughout San Diego County.

While Jeani may have begun as Valerie's grandma, it wasn't long until she transitioned to the role of mom. When Valerie began speaking, she started referring to Jeani as "Mama." Jeani shares, "everybody needs a mama and that's what came out of her mouth, so we ran with it."

Those initial years were quite intense. Jeani notes, "we had a parade of people through our house" as multiple professionals were involved not only in the adoption process, but also to ensure that Valerie received the appropriate therapy and rehabilitation services to grow up healthy. But the "parade" was not unwelcome; Jeani appreciated the support of the County's Child Welfare Services department, now known as the department of Child and Family Well-Being, as well as assistance from other community organizations. She notes, "We've had some amazing people cross our paths."

As Valerie approached school age, Jeani decided she wanted to take on the challenge of homeschooling—partly so that she could travel with Valerie and make the world her classroom. Jeani and George have traveled with Valerie throughout the United States and to several other countries, including Spain, Italy, Morocco, and Mexico. Jeani also made it her mission to build a broad

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support network and link with as many resources as possible. For instance, YMCA kinship support groups and YMCA camps have offered opportunities to connect with families living with similar circumstances.

Jeani has been very transparent with Valerie about the family's journey. Valerie is fully aware of her story and is comfortable sharing it with others. She freely announces, "that old lady there is my mom!" Jeani notes that Valerie is "confident and comfortable." If people ask her questions as to why her mom is older, she'll say, "It's because I'm adopted. My [biological] mom was using drugs." Jeani encourages other kinship caregivers to share age-appropriate information as early as possible. She notes, "You start telling them as soon as they can start talking… little bits at a time and in ways they can understand. But first and foremost, kids need to know they are loved unconditionally."

Despite her early health challenges and a few lingering challenges, such as some sensory processing difficulties, today Valerie is thriving. At nine years old, not only is she a happy and outgoing child, but she is also excelling in academics, a skilled piano player, and a starting pitcher on her softball team.

Jeani's advice to other grandparents who are facing kinship care opportunities is "Don't be scared. You can do this! You've done it before. You can do it again. It has far more rewards than it does challenges." She adds, "Take advantage of every service that is offered. It may not seem that much at the time, but every little bit helps."

While her retirement looks different than she had imagined, raising a child a second time can come with perks. Jeani shares, "I get to raise a girl…I only had boys the first time around." She also comes equipped with more knowledge: "I have life experience, and I can see the warning signs of any little thing before it gets really bad." Still, there are challenges to raising a child when one is older. Jeani admits, "I'm not young and not as physically active as I'd like to be." She also notes that she doesn't have the freedom in retirement that she had imagined.

But, when Jeani's sitting on a bucket, catching softballs as Valerie pitches, her thoughts of what retirement might have been no longer matter. All that matters is the strong and brave girl right in front of her. "I want to invest in her," Jeani asserts, "and take her as far as she can go."

For more information on resources for grandparents raising grandchildren and other kinship caregivers, visit www.livewellsd.org/kinship and refer to the box below.

KINSHIP FAMILY RESOURCES

If you are a kinship caregiver, such as a grandparent raising a grandchild, explore the following links and resources:

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Resource List (English)

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Resource List (Spanish)

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Newsletter Sign-Up

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Handbook (English)

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Handbook (Spanish)

Kinship Roadmap (English)

Kinship Roadmap (Spanish)

211 San Diego Kinship Caregivers Resources

YMCA Kinship Support Services

For assistance with kinship navigation services, contact that YMCA at kinshipyfs@ymcasd.org or **(877) YMCA-4-KIN** (877-9622-4-546).

In the COMMUNITY

CAREGIVER CONFERENCE

The Caregiver Coalition of San Diego will host the free ***We Love Caregivers Conference*** on **Tuesday, October 7 from 1-4 p.m.** at the Bonita-Sunnyside Branch Library, 4375 Bonita Road, Bonita 91902. Learn about caregiver resources, enjoy refreshments, and participate in opportunity drawings. For more information, visit www.caregivercoalitionsd.org/conferences.

HICAP AVAILABLE FOR CONSULTATION DURING MEDICARE ANNUAL ENROLLMENT PERIOD

The Medicare Annual Enrollment Period is from October 15th through December 7th. During this time, you can join, change, or drop a Part C Medicare Advantage plan, or Part D prescription drug plan. Any coverage change you make will take effect January 1st. Operated by Elder Law & Advocacy, the Health Insurance Counseling & Advocacy Program (HICAP) provides free and unbiased help to Medicare beneficiaries. HICAP Counselors are available by phone at **(800) 434-0222** (toll free) or **(858) 565-8772**, Monday - Friday, 8 a.m.-5 p.m. Both phone and in-person appointments are available. For more information, visit www.elaca.org/gethelp.

APPLY FOR MONTHLY NUTRITION (CALFRESH) BENEFITS

Older adults, including those who receive income from SSI/SSP, may be eligible for monthly nutrition benefit assistance through CalFresh! CalFresh recipients receive extra money for nutritious food each month. There are also other benefits, such as reduced cost access to museums, discounted Amazon Prime membership, and more! To learn more about CalFresh, including eligibility, visit www.getcalfresh.org. You may also call **2-1-1** to apply.

Would you like some extra support with completing your application? AIS Outreach & Education staff are available to assist you! Please contact Beatrice Lömer at **Beatrice.Lomer@sdcounty.ca.gov** or **(619) 904-2365**.

PUBLIC AUTHORITY
In-Home Supportive Services
San Diego County

BECOME A PROFESSIONAL CAREGIVER

Help older adults and disabled individuals who receive In-Home Supportive Services (IHSS) by pursuing a rewarding career as a caregiver! Earn extra income and enjoy a flexible schedule while helping people to live independently in their homes. No experience is necessary. The San Diego IHSS Public Authority will assist you with training. Apply by calling **(866) 351-7722** or visiting **www.sdihsspa.com/regapp**. For more information, visit **www.sdihsspa.com**.

IHSS RECIPIENT OR CAREGIVER? JOIN THE IHSS/PUBLIC AUTHORITY ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Current or past In-Home Supportive Services (IHSS) recipients and caregivers (individual providers) are needed to join the IHSS/Public Authority Advisory Committee. The Advisory Committee provides advice and recommendations to the San Diego County Board of Supervisors and other persons or entities related to the delivery of IHSS services. Meetings are currently held in person or via Zoom on the 2nd Friday of each month at 12:45 p.m. Elected members receive a $50 stipend per meeting. For more information, please visit: https://sdihsspa.com/advisorycmte/ or contact Gilberto Contreras-Morales at **(619) 694-3412** or **Gilberto.Contreras-Morales@sdcounty.ca.gov**.

VOLUNTEER RECOGNITION

The Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) is proud to present **Martha Bryson** as the Volunteer of the Quarter, nominated by the Senior Gleaners of San Diego County. In just over three years with the organization, Martha has already volunteered 436 hours. Her uplifting energy and willingness to take on any task, from picking fruit on the field, to storing supplies inside her own home, and even acting as an ambassador for Senior Gleaners at outreach events, has proved crucial to reducing hunger and creating ties with the community. She also volunteers with PATH San Diego, helping distribute food and assisting clients who are experiencing homelessness.

Martha Bryson

Martha is described as "dependable, hard-working, and selfless," and her warm personality and positivity are encouraging to all who are fortunate to work with her. She is known for showing up early and staying late for many volunteer tasks. Martha represents the best of Senior Gleaners with professionalism and kindness when she attends community events. As one of her Senior Gleaner colleagues stated: "Her energy, enthusiasm, and compassion inspire the rest of us to give our best."

Martha takes pride in knowing that her assistance with gathering food for the community makes a difference in the lives of others. Congratulations Martha, and thank you for your service!

JOIN THE RSVP ADVISORY COUNCIL

Are you dedicated to volunteerism? Are you looking for ways to make a difference in your community? Do you have experience working with volunteers in a non-profit setting? Do you have experience working with older adults? If you answered "yes" to one or more of these questions, consider applying to be part of the RSVP Advisory Council! The Council meets once a month to provide support and direction to the RSVP programs. Activities include assisting staff with the annual RSVP volunteer recognition events, annually assessing RSVP program performance, helping to promote RSVP in the community, and providing ongoing advice to staff. You will meet other involved community members and become part of an amazing team of people. For more information, please contact **Pam Plimpton** at **(858) 495-5769** or **pam.plimpton@sdcounty.ca.gov.**

THANK YOU TO VETERAN VOLUNTEERS

We extend our deepest gratitude to the Veterans who continue to serve our community through volunteerism with the same courage, dedication, and selflessness that defined their military service. Your willingness to volunteer your time and talents serves as an inspiring reminder that true service never ends. Your commitment not only strengthens the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program, but also uplifts those around you, demonstrating the power of resilience, compassion, and unity. Because of you, lives are touched, hearts are encouraged, and our community becomes stronger.

Thank you for your service in the past and for the service you continue to provide today.

MENTAL HEALTH

Good mental health starts with you...how are you feeling?

You know that you should get annual checkups for your physical health, but what about for your mental health? Check Your Mood is an annual event to promote mental health awareness and screenings, occurring around the first full of week of October during National Depression Screening Day and Mental Illness Awareness Week. Getting screened for depression is an important part of taking care of yourself. Join other community members in San Diego County to access mental health resources!

Visit https://www.livewellsd.org/events/check-your-mood to access brief screening questionnaires. While these self-assessments are not diagnostic tools, the screenings can help you monitor your mood and overall emotional wellbeing. Even if you are feeling well, strengthen your resilience by practicing daily self-care exercises. Check out self-care tips at https://takeaction4mh.com/resources/mental-health-self-care-tips/.

Should you need help, there are a variety of tools to help you, including talk therapy, group support, medication and other options. The faster you reach out for support, the better your outcome is likely to be. Free mental health resources are available through San Diego County's It's Up to Us campaign at https://up2sd.org/resources. Help is also available 24/7 through the San Diego Access and Crisis Line at **(888) 724-7240**.

MENTAL HEALTH PREVENTION AND EARLY INTERVENTION FOR OLDER ADULTS

The Union of Pan Asian Communities (UPAC) Positive Solutions Program (PSP) provides outreach, along with mental health prevention and early intervention, to home-bound individuals (60+) who are at risk of becoming depressed or are showing signs of minor depression. Trained and compassionate staff members help clients recognize symptoms, identify possible causes of depression, and teach proven ways to cope. This is achieved through short-term psychoeducation, the evidence-based PEARLS (Program to Encourage Active and Rewarding Lives for Seniors) model, and other brief interventions. The goal is to reduce feelings of isolation and increase an individual's social support system and overall self-sufficiency. No healthcare insurance is required as the program is FREE. Therapists provide virtual (Zoom) or over-the-phone short-term counseling sessions in English, Spanish, or Vietnamese.

UPAC

Explore the PSP website for more information: www.upacsd.org/services/adult-and-older-adult-mental-health-programs/positive-solutions/. If you are interested in receiving more information, completing a referral, or scheduling a presentation on the program, please call: **(619) 481-2652**.

FALL PREVENTION TIPS

One in four older adults (65+) fall each year. To reduce your risk of falling:

- **Stay active** to improve your strength, flexibility, and balance. Walking, dancing, Tai Chi, and exercise classes are all good ways to improve your health.
- **Talk with your doctor** about health issues such as osteoporosis, your Vitamin D level, medications, difficulty with hearing or vision, or if you feel faint, off-balance, or dizzy. Your doctor or pharmacist can also look at your medications to check for side effects that can affect your coordination.
- **Have your vision checked** at least one time each year by a professional.
- **Make your home safer:** remove things you could trip or slip on, maintain good lighting and nightlights, and install strong grab bars and handrails. Our eyes often need more light as we age.

For more tips, visit: www.SanDiegoFallPrevention.org.

FALL PREVENTION RESOURCE GUIDES

For more fall prevention tips, check out the **regional fall prevention guides** created by the San Diego Fall Prevention Task Force. The guides connect older adults to organizations, programs, and information that can help reduce fall risk.

To access the guides, visit www.SanDiegoFallPrevention.org and scroll down to the "Task Force Materials" section.

CARE MANAGEMENT SUPPORT FOR VETERANS

Care management services are available for local Veterans through the San Diego Veterans Independence Services at any Age (SD-VISA) program. SD-VISA serves Veterans enrolled in the Veterans Administration San Diego Healthcare System (VASDHS) who are at risk of nursing home placement. SD-VISA is a self-directed program through which Veterans privately employ individuals to provide homemaker and personal care services.

The Veterans Administration provides a monthly budget that is primarily used to pay caregivers. Family and friends can become paid caregivers and be compensated for some of the work they are already providing. In addition to caregiving services, the monthly budget can be used for other goods and services that allow the Veteran to continue living safely at home, such as fall detection cameras, lift chairs, home-delivered meals, air purifiers, housekeeping, and yard work. An Options Counselor can assist in guiding the purchase of items that support the Veteran's medical needs or disability.

To learn more about Veterans Directed Care/SD-VISA and apply, Veterans should consult their VASDHS primary care provider.

COMMUNITY CALENDAR

Please note: To ensure a timely and relevant calendar, the online and printed versions of this calendar may vary.

OCTOBER 11, SATURDAY
4 - 4:30 PM

A ***senior dental care presentation*** will be offered by the County of San Diego at the Lakeside Library, 12428 Woodside Ave., Lakeside 92040. Learn how to prevent dental diseases, the diseases linked to poor oral health, and how to access dental services. For more information, call **(619) 443-1811**.

OCTOBER 18, SATURDAY
2 PM - 4 PM

Gardening Practices That Save Water will be offered by the Solana Center at the Fallbrook Library, 124 S. Mission Rd., Fallbrook 92028. Learn ways to garden that work with the San Diego region's semi-arid climate. All pre-registered attendees who are residents of unincorporated San Diego County will receive a FREE kitchen scraps container. For more information and to register, email **compost@solanacenter.org or** call **(760) 436-7986 x 700**.

OCTOBER 24, FRIDAY
12 PM -1 PM

Join Art of Elan for ***Midday Music,*** a free, lunchtime classical concert series in the 9th Floor Shirley Special Events Suite at the Central Library, 330 Park Blvd., San Diego 92101. Concert goers are invited to bring lunch and enjoy curated chamber music while overlooking downtown. Free. The library has 2-hour free parking with a validated ticket, and is also a block away from the Blue and Orange Trolley lines. No RSVP required. This event will also occur on November 21, 2025. For details, email Monnee Tong at **mtong@sandiego.gov** or call **(619) 238-6650**.

OCTOBER 25, SATURDAY
2 - 3 PM

A Home/Kitchen Fire Safety and Plan Your Escape workshop will be hosted by the Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) at the College-Rolando Library, 6600 Montezuma Rd., San Diego 92115. Learn steps to make your home safe, build a home fire escape plan, use the provided checklist to make a plan, and more. Register at https://sandiego.librarymarket.com/. For more information, contact Jessica Buck at **JGBuck@sandiego.gov** or **(619) 533-3902**.

NOVEMBER 1, SATURDAY
10 AM - 1 PM

The 2nd Annual ***Women of Color Conference: Together We Thrive*** will be held at the George L. Stevens Senior Center, 570 South 65th St., San Diego 92114. The conference will explore caregiving, planning, and end-of-life decisions with honesty and compassion. Get tools and resources to help you plan with confidence. Free. Lunch provided. Advance registration required. To register, visit www.aarp.org. Create a new account or log in to your existing account. AARP membership is not required. For questions, contact AARP California at **caaarp@aarp.org**.

NOVEMBER 3, MONDAY
11 AM - 12:30 PM

A workshop, ***The Empowered Caregiver: Supporting Independence*** will be offered by the Alzheimer's Association at the Mission Valley YMCA, 5505 Friars Rd., San Diego 92108. This program focuses on how to help a person living with dementia take part in daily activities. Learn how to provide the right amount of support, balance safety and independence, and manage expectations. The session will also cover driving safety and when it is time to stop driving. To RSVP, visit https://www.alz.org/sandiego/education-programs or call **(800) 272-3900**.

NOVEMBER 6, THURSDAY
6-7:30 PM

Healing Through the Holidays-After the Death of a Loved One will be offered by Sharp HospiceCare at Sharp Spectrum Auditorium, 8695 Spectrum Center Blvd., San Diego 92123. This evening program will include information on how to cope with grief during the holidays, a personal story on grief and hope, and a closing reflection. Light refreshments will be served. Free. To RSVP, visit www.sharp.com/events or call **(800) 827-4277**.

NOVEMBER 21, FRIDAY
11 AM - 12 PM

Alzheimer's San Diego presents ***Care in the Last Stage*** at the Rancho Bernardo Oasis Lifelong Learning Center, 17170 Bernardo Center Dr., San Diego, CA 92128. Learn what to expect in the last stages of Alzheimer's and other dementias, and how caregivers can communicate and provide care as needs change. Free. To register, go to https://san-diego.oasisnet.org/ or call **(858) 240-2880.**

SEND IN YOUR ITEMS

We welcome your contributions to this calendar. Email: **sarah.jackson@sdcounty.ca.gov**.

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