

# AGING & independence

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

## Ombudsman Volunteers: Bringing a Voice to Vulnerable Residents

By **Kim Gallo**  
Director, Aging & Independence Services

The COVID-19 pandemic was still in full swing in 2021 when Elinor Merl took her first steps to become a Long-Term Care Ombudsman volunteer. Elinor has always been a service-minded person who loves to share her knowledge with others and put her problem-solving skills to good use. She spent much of her career providing retirement savings education to employee groups and has volunteered for a variety of organizations, such as Meals on Wheels. With room in her schedule and the drive to do more to help others, Elinor realized she would be a good fit for the Ombudsman program.

Long-Term Care Ombudsman program volunteers advocate to improve the quality of life for seniors and those with disabilities who are residents of nursing homes and residential care facilities. The program is mandated by the federal government with authority under the Older Americans Act. In San Diego County, 41 certified volunteers and 13 paid staff identify, investigate, and resolve complaints made by, or on behalf of, residents. Volunteers engage in a variety of tasks, such as: visiting facilities to monitor and address issues, meeting with residents to offer support and assistance, advocating with residents in the resolution of complaints,

providing education on resident rights, and investigating issues of poor care, neglect, or abuse.



Elinor Merl, a volunteer with the Long-Term Care Ombudsman program.

While Elinor was excited to get started, enrolling in a volunteer program during the pandemic involved some challenges. She needed to complete the 36-hour training over Zoom rather than in person. Elinor wondered, “How am I going to get through a three-hour Zoom meeting four days a week?” But once the first session started, Elinor was pleasantly surprised. “The trainer kept it varied and interesting with different kinds of activities... some lecture, a lot of videos, interactive work, and scenarios to work through.” Elinor also had to get properly fitted for personal protective equipment, including an N-95 mask.

Before going off on her own, Elinor spent 10 hours shadowing a more experienced volunteer. Doing so was very helpful for building her confidence. By October 2022, Elinor was a proud Ombudsman volunteer with two facilities located near downtown assigned to her.

Residents’ needs and wishes often get lost in the hustle and bustle of long-term care facilities, many of which are home to very ill or frail residents with complicated medical needs. Volunteers work to address a variety of resident concerns. Issues may include call-light response

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time, complaints about food, friction with a roommate, or even serious care issues. Ombudsman volunteers bring a voice for these vulnerable residents who may not have other advocates in their lives. Regardless of whether the issue is big or small, volunteers help residents feel heard and empowered.

Elinor quickly put her investigative, problem-solving, and communication skills to good use. One resident who enjoyed sitting in the facility hallway reported that she hadn't left her bed in three days. Elinor was able to make the nursing staff aware of this resident's request and assist the resident to alert staff when she wishes to be relocated through use of her call bell. Another resident felt that one of the nurses was not treating her with kindness. Elinor was able to speak to the facility and help resolve the issue. On another occasion, Elinor observed facility procedures surrounding meal delivery in response to a resident's complaint that hot food was being served cold.

While it is the role of the Ombudsman to represent facility residents, volunteers must do a thorough investigation of complaints and look at allegations from all angles. Sometimes Elinor discovers that allegations are unfounded and there does not appear to be negligence. "You have to do your due diligence," Elinor explains. Regardless of the final outcome, Elinor's sincere hope is that each resident "will see and feel that I have acted in their best interest."

The work can be both intense and deeply meaningful. One thing is for certain...no two days are ever the same.

This is one of the perks of the role, according to Elinor: "What I find gratifying is that every situation is unique... it may look the same, but it has a different twist. I find that enjoyable; focusing on the problem solving. What is the real source of the problem? How do you solve it to the best of your ability?"

Volunteering brings many rewards for Elinor. "Staying busy and involved is part of how I operate," Elinor shares. "For me to have days and days of down time is depressing." She adds, "It is definitely gratifying when an individual has a legitimate complaint, and you can resolve it to your satisfaction." But most of all, Elinor feels a deep sense of purpose simply showing up and being present for those who don't have others in their lives to help. Elinor explains, "Otherwise the folks I'm working with don't have a voice."

In order to serve as an Ombudsman, prospective volunteers must attend a 36-hour certification training, make a one-year commitment of about five hours per week, have access to reliable transportation, and pass a physical and background check. New volunteers must also complete a minimum of 10 hours of mentoring before they can be certified. For more information about volunteering, email [Kristin.Rigsbee@sdcounty.ca.gov](mailto:Kristin.Rigsbee@sdcounty.ca.gov) or call (858) 505-6985.

Anyone—including residents, family members, friends, staff, or concerned community members—may voice a concern or file a complaint about a facility with the Long-Term Care Ombudsman program. To connect with the office, call (800) 640-4661.

## CARE MANAGEMENT: MULTI-PURPOSE SENIOR SERVICE PROGRAM

Sometimes staying independent in one's home means getting help. That extra help with bill paying, shopping, laundry, and other tasks can keep someone from needing to live in a nursing home. If you or a loved one are age 65+, eligible for Medi-Cal, and need assistance to continue living safely at home, consider applying for the Multipurpose Senior Services Program (MSSP). MSSP care managers work with the client, family members, and medical team to find and coordinate services in the home. Through the timely use of services, MSSP protects frail older adults and helps them live at home for longer.



Care management services include: a comprehensive health and psychosocial assessment; care planning with the client and family; arrangement of services; coordination of care with other community agencies; some limited payment of in-home services; monthly phone contact; quarterly home visits; and ongoing monitoring/phone contacts as needed.

For more information on MSSP or to apply, contact the AIS Call Center at (800) 339-4661 M-F from 8 a.m.-5 p.m.

# In the COMMUNITY

## JOIN THE AIS ADVISORY COUNCIL

The Aging & Independence Services (AIS) Advisory Council assists AIS staff members on policy and program needs related to its role as the Area Agency on Aging for San Diego County. There are nearly 30 members of the Advisory Council who meet the second Monday of each month at noon at the County Operations Center (5560 Overland Avenue, San Diego). The Council is currently seeking to fill open positions and is particularly seeking representation from those age 60 and older. Individuals from all ages and backgrounds are welcome. For more information on the Advisory Council or to apply to join, contact [AIS.AdvisoryCouncil.HHSA@sdcounty.ca.gov](mailto:AIS.AdvisoryCouncil.HHSA@sdcounty.ca.gov) or call (858) 495-5858. To learn more about AIS, visit [www.aging.sandiegocounty.gov](http://www.aging.sandiegocounty.gov).

## MAY IS MENTAL HEALTH MONTH

Throughout the month of May, individuals, organizations, and communities join together across the country to show support and bring awareness to the importance of mental health. This year's theme is "Look Around, Look Within" which encourages people to consider the impact of their surroundings on their mental health.

Take a moment to consider your surroundings. Do you feel safe? Do you have access to health care and grocery stores? Does your home support you, both physically and mentally? While many parts of your environment can be out of your control, there are steps you can take to change your space and protect your well-being:

- Work toward securing safe and stable housing: This can be challenging due to finances, age, and other reasons, but there are a few things you can try, such as reaching out to state/local agencies to secure housing, removing safety hazards in the home, or finding another space (such as a community center or friend's home) where you can get the comfort you are missing at home.
- Focus on your home: Consider keeping your space tidy, sleep-friendly, and well-ventilated. Surround yourself with items that help you feel calm and positive.
- Create bonds with your neighborhood and community: Get to know the people living around you, join or start neighbors helping-neighbors groups, and support local businesses to challenge gentrification.
- Connect with nature: Hike in a forest, sit in a city park, bring a plant inside, or keep the shades open for natural light.

If you're taking steps to improve your surroundings but are still struggling with your mental health, you may be experiencing signs of a mental health condition. Take a free, private screening at [mhascreening.org](http://mhascreening.org) to help you figure out what is going on and determine next steps.

For local resources and additional tips to support mental health, visit <https://up2sd.org/topics/mental-health>.

If you or someone you care about is in crisis or would like behavioral health resources or support, please call the San Diego Access and Crisis line at (888) 724-7240 (24 hours a day, 7 days a week). Calls are answered by experienced counselors, with assistance available in over 150 languages.

**MAY IS  
MENTAL  
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TAKE SOME TIME TO  
LOOK AROUND, LOOK WITHIN  
[MHANATIONAL.ORG/MAY](http://MHANATIONAL.ORG/MAY)



## VOLUNTEERS OF THE MONTH

Tom and Robin Paine are the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) Volunteers of the Month for April 2023. They were nominated by Laurie Switzer from the USS Midway Museum.

Lifelong volunteers, Tom and Robin met five decades ago in high school while volunteering as counselors for a 6th grade science camp. Although the couple “tied the knot” close to 50 years ago, they are still tying knots today on board the USS Midway Museum. Both volunteer with the Midway’s Knot Team to produce knotted items, including bracelets and key chains, which then are offered to museum guests in exchange for donations that go to support higher education for local high school students. This “Bravo Zulu” scholarship fund has given more than 144 scholarships since inception, and the Knot Team has just exceeded one million dollars raised!



Robin and Tom Paine

Both Robin and Tom take the Midway story out to the public as members of the Outreach Team. They engage with the public as ambassadors for the museum at fairs, parades, and airshows. Over the years, they each have also made notable contributions to the Midway’s education programs and have served on the museum’s Radio Team, which conducts HAM radio events the second Saturday of each month (Call Sign: NI6IW).

Tom also currently serves on the Safety Team. He assists museum guests, assuring that they find their way around, safely, on the “city at sea”. The aircraft carrier can be tricky to navigate and there are elements of a ship that one might not find in a typical museum housed in a building. Having volunteers out and about to greet guests and support them in their experience is at the core of the Safety Team’s mission.

Tom and Robin’s commitment to the Midway spans over a decade. Both love to volunteer and cherish many special moments from volunteering. Robin shares that her most memorable experience involved participating in a parade “watching the crowd’s excited reaction as volunteers traveled the parade route with the inflatable USS Midway Carrier.” Tom’s most memorable moment was connecting via radio with people on the tiny, remote island of St. Helena, 1,250 miles off the coast of Africa in the middle of the South Atlantic Ocean.

Director of Volunteer Programs, Laurie Switzer, shares, “Many would say these two are unsung heroes, often going above and beyond, offering support to multiple teams, and bringing a sincere love of humanity to all who come in contact with them.”

Congratulations and thank you to Tom and Robin for your service to the community!

## VOLUNTEER AT THE USS MIDWAY MUSEUM

Join the USS Midway Museum’s dynamic team to support this exciting and historical visitor destination! There are several meaningful assignments to choose from on the aircraft carrier museum for veterans and civilians alike. Opportunities include: serving as a docent; working on the safety team, knot team, or with guest services; providing exhibit support or data entry; and assisting with aircraft or ship restoration and maintenance. If you’re a “people person,” this is a great opportunity to share in the passion of having fun, while building a greater sense of community through an enriching and engaging volunteer experience.

If you have questions, contact the USS Midway Museum volunteer coordinator at **(619) 398-8289** or [volunteering@midway.org](mailto:volunteering@midway.org). For volunteer opportunities with dozens of other community organizations, contact the AIS Senior Volunteer Programs office at **(858) 505-6399**.



# OLDER AMERICANS MONTH



AGING UNBOUND: MAY 2023

Established in 1963, Older Americans Month (OAM) is celebrated every May. Led by the Administration for Community Living (ACL), OAM is a time for us to acknowledge the contributions and achievements of older Americans, highlight important trends, and strengthen our commitment to honoring our older citizens.

This year's theme, Aging Unbound, offers an opportunity to explore a wide range of aging experiences and to promote the importance of enjoying independence and fulfillment by paving our own paths as we age.

This May, join Aging & Independence Services as we recognize the 60th anniversary of OAM and challenge the narrative on aging. Here are some ways we can all participate in Aging Unbound:

- ***Embrace the opportunity to change.*** Find a new passion, go on an adventure, and push boundaries by not letting age define your limits. Invite creativity and purpose into your life by trying new activities in your community to bring in more growth, joy, and energy.
- ***Explore the rewards of growing older.*** With age comes knowledge, which provides insight and confidence to understand and experience the world more deeply. Continue to grow that knowledge through reading, listening, classes, and creative activities.
- ***Stay engaged in your community.*** Everyone benefits when everyone is connected and involved. Stay active by volunteering, working, mentoring, participating in social clubs, and taking part in activities at your local senior center or elsewhere in the community.
- ***Form relationships.*** As an essential ingredient of well-being, relationships can enhance your quality of life by introducing new ideas and unique perspectives. Invest time with people to discover deeper connections with family, friends, and community members.

## HEALTHIER LIVING CLASSES

These free, interactive, and goal-oriented workshops focus on support, skill development, sharing, and building confidence to manage chronic conditions, such as arthritis, depression, heart disease, or diabetes. During the six sessions you will learn how to set goals for your health and stick to them, read food labels and meal plan, manage stress and difficult emotions, safely manage medications, and more!

**May 16 - June 27 (Tuesdays)**, 9:30 a.m.-12 p.m. at the Nobel Athletic Fields & Recreation Center, 8810 Judicial Dr. San Diego 92122. To register, visit [bit.ly/41FHO2O](https://bit.ly/41FHO2O) and enter Activity Code 106820. Ok to begin May 23.

**May 23-June 27 (Tuesdays)**, 9:30 a.m.-12 p.m. at Talmadge Senior Village, 5252 El Cajon Blvd., San Diego 92115. To register, call (619) 265-0194 or email [nramos@hthf.org](mailto:nramos@hthf.org).

**June 26-July 31 (Mondays)**, 12-2:30 p.m. at the San Marcos Library, 2 Civic Center Dr., San Marcos 92069. To register, call (760) 891-3000 or email [sanmarcoslibrary@sdcounty.ca.gov](mailto:sanmarcoslibrary@sdcounty.ca.gov).

For more information, visit [www.healthierlivingsd.org](http://www.healthierlivingsd.org) or call (858) 495-5500.

## FREE TAI CHI CLASSES

In partnership with the City of San Diego, Aging & Independence Services will be offering free *Tai Chi for Arthritis and Fall Prevention Classes* at Stagecoach Park (3420 Camino De Los Coches, Carlsbad 92009) on **Tuesdays and Thursdays from 8-9 a.m. and 9-10 a.m. starting May 9.**

This evidence-based falls prevention program has been shown to improve movement, balance, strength, and flexibility; offer relaxation; and decrease pain and falls. This program is appropriate for adults with or without arthritis, rheumatic diseases, or related musculoskeletal conditions. Older adults at a higher risk of falling are strongly encouraged to attend.

To register, visit [www.carlsbadconnect.org](http://www.carlsbadconnect.org) and use activity code 17401 (8 a.m. class) or 17402 (9 a.m. class). Walk-ins are also accepted. For questions or more information, please email [HealthierLiving.HHSA@sdcounty.ca.gov](mailto:HealthierLiving.HHSA@sdcounty.ca.gov) or call (858) 495-5500.

## TOOL TO LOCATE QUALITY ASSISTED LIVING

Accepting that a loved one can no longer be safely cared for at home can be difficult. For those who are looking to identify quality assisted living facilities, Choose Well may be able to help. Choose Well is a free, innovative, web-based tool sponsored by the County of San Diego that helps older adults and their families make informed decisions when selecting assisted living facilities. Visit <https://ChooseWellSanDiego.org> to discover specially evaluated Choose Well facilities that have voluntarily agreed to be scored on 11 measures of quality.



## INCLUSIVE DANCE CLASSES

Do you like to dance? The Wheelchair Dancers Organization invites people of all abilities to join in on their free dance classes! Try a little bit of ballet, some ballroom, a bit of bachata, and even a Bocelli aria in a dance-inspired workout that will be held on **Saturday, June 3 from 10-11 a.m.** at Belmont Village Senior Living-Sabre Springs, 13075 Evening Creek South Dr, San Diego 92128. Suitable for all ages and abilities; work out at your own pace to kick off your weekend. For more information on this and other class opportunities, including virtual classes, visit [www.WDOinclusivedance.org](http://www.WDOinclusivedance.org).

# COMMUNITY CALENDAR

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

## MAY 24, WEDNESDAY 1-3 P.M.

An author presentation, *Out of Love: A Daughter's Journey With Her Mom To The End*, will be hosted by the San Marcos Library, 2 Civic Center Drive, San Marcos 92069. Author Lynn Abaté-Johnson will talk about her six-year journey as a caregiver to her mother, from the emotions and responsibilities to caring for a loved one to the lessons she learned throughout her journey. For details or to RSVP, call (760) 891-3000 or email [sanmarcoslibrary@sdcounty.ca.gov](mailto:sanmarcoslibrary@sdcounty.ca.gov). Cost: Free.

## MAY 25, THURSDAY 1 P.M.

A free class, *Aging in Place: Can You Do it Safely and Easily?*, will be held at the Serra Mesa-Kearney Mesa Branch Library, 9006 Aero Dr. San Diego 92123. This course will take a look at what you can do to your current living environment to make it more safe, comfortable, and livable as you age. From simple fixes to major remodels, there are things you can do to decrease the chances of an accident or injury in your home. To RSVP, email [smstaff@sandiego.gov](mailto:smstaff@sandiego.gov) or call (858) 573-1396.

## JUNE 1, THURSDAY 9 A.M.-12 P.M.

A free *Senior and Family Resource Fair* will be hosted by St. Paul's Senior Services at the St. Paul's Conference Center, 2557 3rd Ave., San Diego 92103. There will be over 40 vendors in attendance and a

presentation, Fall Prevention–Safety At Home. For more information or to RSVP, visit [www.stpaulseniors.org](http://www.stpaulseniors.org).

## JUNE 9, FRIDAY 10-11 A.M.

A *Brain Health Seminar* presented by the Sharp Neurocognitive Research Center will be hosted at the North University Community Library, 8820 Judicial Drive, San Diego 92122. This presentation will cover dementia, current dementia research, caregiver burden, and maintaining a healthy brain. Registration is recommended. To RSVP, call (858) 581-9637 or email [AEBbay@sandiego.gov](mailto:AEBbay@sandiego.gov).

## JUNE 9, FRIDAY 10-11:30 A.M.

*Coping with Personality Behavior Changes*, a free class, will be hosted by Alzheimer's San Diego at Scripps Miramar Ranch Library, 10301 Scripps Lake Dr., San Diego 92131. Learn about how people living with Alzheimer's disease and dementia experience changes to their behaviors and personality, what those changes mean, and how to respond. Register at [www.alzsd.org/event](http://www.alzsd.org/event) or call (858) 492-4400.

## JUNE 15, THURSDAY 1-2:30 P.M.

A class, *Navigating Retirement: Working after Retirement – The New Normal* (Course # 441) will be hosted by San Diego Oasis at the Grossmont Lifelong Learning Center, 5500 Grossmont Center Dr. Suite 269, La Mesa 91942. This presentation will debunk myths about working after retirement, discuss the advantages of working

as an older adult, and explore semi-retirement opportunities like entrepreneurship. Visit [www.SanDiegoOasis.org](http://www.SanDiegoOasis.org) or call (619) 881-6262 to RSVP. Cost: \$15.

## JUNE 16, FRIDAY 10-11 A.M.

A free class, *Don't be a Scam Victim: Advice from the FBI* (Course #540), will be hosted by San Diego Oasis at the Grossmont Lifelong Learning Center, 5500 Grossmont Center Dr. Ste 269, La Mesa 91942. Learn about financial scams affecting seniors today. How do they happen? What do they look like? This course will teach you how to prevent falling for scams and what to do if you become a victim. Visit [www.SanDiegoOasis.org](http://www.SanDiegoOasis.org) or call (619)-881-6262 to RSVP.

## JUNE 20, TUESDAY 10 A.M.-12 P.M.

*Health Care Navigation for Older Adults*, a free event hosted by Sharp Grossmont Hospital, will be held at the La Mesa Adult Enrichment Center, Main Hall, 8450 La Mesa Blvd. La Mesa 91942. Navigating healthcare can be difficult, but this event is meant to help older adults, caregivers, and concerned loved ones find healthcare resources. There will be a panel for questions and answers. To register, go to <https://www.sharp.com/health-classes/>. If the class is full, please call (800) 827-4277 to be placed on the wait list.

## SEND IN YOUR ITEMS

We welcome your contributions to this monthly calendar. Email [sarah.jackson@sdcounty.ca.gov](mailto:sarah.jackson@sdcounty.ca.gov).



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