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Training for Alzheimer's caregivers doesn't go far enough, advocates say

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There are no available statistics showing exactly how many Alzheimer's and dementia patients are in Tennessee's 14,757 assisted living units, but it is clear that the number is large and likely to increase.

Nationally, an estimated 5.4 million U.S. residents live with Alzheimer's disease. And absent a cure or medical advancement, that number could climb to 16 million by 2050, according to the [Alzheimer's Association](#). The organization estimates 800,000 of that total are living alone in a variety of settings.

Those who have worked with and studied Alzheimer's patients say that training requirements for caregivers don't go far enough. More is needed, particularly as people with the disease are in settings without specialized staff.

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In Tennessee, a state task force on Alzheimer's disease estimated that 120,000 state residents were suffering from various stages of the disease in 2010.

The latest available data from the state Health Department show that across the state, 92 assisted living centers have secure Alzheimer's or dementia units — 23 in the Nashville region — where residents are literally locked in, preventing them from

wandering and injuring themselves.

But Alzheimer's and dementia patients are not required to live in only secure units.

The state authorizes assisted living facilities without secure units to

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provide a variety of special services to Alzheimer's residents.

And hundreds, and perhaps thousands, of residents with Alzheimer's and dementia are believed to live in regular assisted living units with others who do not have those diseases.

A growing risk

While assisted living in those nonsecure units gives senior citizens greater independence, experts say that independence may come with growing risk as a person advances through the stages of dementia and Alzheimer's disease

"It can be very hard, but as the disease advances, the family and the facility officials have to consider the need for a higher level of care," said Dr. James S. Powers, who heads a Vanderbilt fellowship program on geriatrics.

Powers said each case has to be considered separately.

"As the disease progresses, they do need more services," he noted.

Andrew Sandler, executive director of Park Manor senior living community in Belle Meade, is working toward the opening next year of an affiliated secure assisted living facility for Alzheimer's and dementia residents. Park Manor has independent senior housing and assisted living units.

Sandler said the new "Abe's Garden" will have three neighborhoods with as many as 18 residents in each.

Sandler, 57, who has worked in nursing homes and assisted living facilities for decades in Tennessee and Louisiana, says the key elements to caring for those with Alzheimer's disease and dementia are adequate staffing levels and staff training.

"Many Alzheimer's patients are safe and happy in assisted living," Sandler said. "You have to train your staff."

Under Tennessee regulations staffers who work in secure units for Alzheimer's patients must undergo training annually in five categories:

- Identifying and alleviating safety risks;
- Providing assistance to residents with activities of daily living;
- Communicating with families and other persons interested in the resident;
- Basic facts about the causes, progression and management of Alzheimer's disease; and



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- Dealing with dysfunctional behavior and catastrophic reactions in the residents.

Caregivers who work outside the secure dementia units are not required by the state to undergo any specific training. Facility operators are barred, however, from hiring people on the state Health Department's abuse registry, which lists people charged with patient abuse.

Also, state rules require that a registered nurse be either on staff or available as needed.

Tiffany Cloud-Mann, vice president of programs and outreach for the Mid-South regional chapter of the Alzheimer's Association, said the training requirements should be more stringent for any caregiver for Alzheimer's patients. Those dealing with Alzheimer's need to learn to recognize the unusual behaviors and be able to identify the cause.

Often, she said, the unusual or unexpected behaviors are the result of fear or confusion.

Sheryl Zimmerman, a professor at the University of North Carolina who has authored several studies on assisted living and dementia, said those working with Alzheimer's residents need to learn how to redirect patients when they become agitated.

"It might be that music will calm a person down or it might be a little one on one," she said. And she said what works one time might not work the next.

Sandra Stimson, executive director of the [National Council of Certified Dementia Practitioners](#), said she recommends that those who deal with dementia patients have an initial 12 hours of in-person training on topics such as bathing and toileting, paranoia and depression, hallucinations and nutrition.

Stimson said she thinks training for dealing with dementia and Alzheimer's residents should be required for the entire staff of assisted living facilities and should include a wide range of subjects, ranging from intimacy and sexuality to dealing with and preventing residents in a secure unit from walking away.

"Up to 80 percent of the residents may be Alzheimer's," she said. "What we recommend is going above and beyond what the state requires."

Her association certifies dementia unit managers, dementia trainers and caregivers through a series of training programs.

In Tennessee, the only certification required is for the administrator of the assisted living facility. To be certified, an assisted living administrator is required to undergo a criminal background check

and fulfill education requirements. To renew their licenses, administrators must show that they have had 24 hours of continuing education per year in such fields as health care management, state rules and regulations, and nutrition and food services.

A person licensed as a nursing home administrator also may act as an administrator of an assisted living center.

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