

Volunteers rescue elderly couple trapped in home by snow with no water; ‘Good Morning Sunshine’

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ST. GEORGE — An elderly couple in a rural area spent the entire Christmas weekend snowed in at their home without water before help from dedicated volunteers arrived early last week.

The volunteers were called to help by Memory Matters, a nonprofit organization that works to reduce isolation and improve wellness for individuals with dementia and their caregivers. It runs a program called “Good Morning Sunshine” wherein volunteers call clients each business day to check on their well-being.

Substantial snowfall covered their home and dirt driveway, preventing them from leaving

The elderly couple lives in a remote rural area in Washington County. On Christmas Eve, substantial snowfall covered their home and dirt driveway, preventing them from leaving, according to a news release by Memory Matters. To complicate matters, the home’s water line also froze.

The husband suffers from dementia with his wife serving as caregiver. The wife suffers health issues, including a shoulder condition that further makes their isolated living situation more difficult. They also have no family or religious ties in the area.

She had been shoveling and melting snow for them to drink

“She had been shoveling and melting snow for them to drink and to bathe in since Christmas,” the news release reads.

When Memory Matters returned to regular operations Dec. 27, 2016, a volunteer made the scheduled “Good Morning Sunshine” call to the caregiver, finding her and her

husband in the distressful situation. The caller also noticed the elderly woman's speech was slurred, pointing to a possibly life-threatening situation.

At that point Memory Matters Executive Director LuAnn Lundquist mobilized several volunteers to help with the situation, calling personal friends to drive over and plow the road and check on the couple. They brought along a nurse who discovered that the woman was suffering from high blood pressure.

They then transported the couple to the hospital and stayed with them while the elderly woman was evaluated and subsequently placed under observation overnight for her heart condition.

Lundquist also found a plumber to fix the water line that day at a highly discounted rate. One volunteer used his own backhoe to dig to the water line free of charge.

"It was amazing to make those telephone calls on a cold morning and have people leave their family Christmas activities to go to the home of a stranger, use their equipment and resources to shovel driveways in bad weather," Lundquist said.

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"When I went to the hospital to visit with the caregiver she was in tears and said, 'I can't believe that strangers would do so much to help us. They don't even know us.'"

Given its success, Memory Matters is attempting to grow the telephone reassurance program to reach a much larger group of seniors than the handful it currently serves.

The free "Good Morning Sunshine" service is available to anyone 55 or older suffering from dementia or to the caregivers of such clients. It covers all of Southern Utah and Mesquite Valley in Nevada.

As much as Memory Matters would like to grow the service, Lundquist said it can be a hard sell to the demographic of dementia patients whose judgment may be impaired when they decline such offers of help.

This generation often won't ask for help

"This generation often won't ask for help," Lundquist said of the 55-or-older demographic.

The telephone reassurance program, however, counters the need for individuals to reach out themselves, as volunteers are trained to notice subtle cues that indicate someone may be in need of help.

Lundquist said she encourages people not to hesitate to check in on their elderly neighbors.

“Go talk to them and find out, because so many people simply won’t ask for help.”

Such proactivity may help prevent senseless tragedy.

Nine years ago, a similar situation involving another elderly couple occurred not far from last week’s incident.

“The caregiver felt hopeless and would not reach out because of the stigma of her husband’s dementing disease. She lost hope and felt there was no other option for her. She ended her husband’s life, called the sheriff to report it and asked him to come and find their bodies as she ended her life as well,” the news release reads.

The telephone reassurance program is just one of many services provided by the organization. More information can be found at the [Memory Matters](#) website or by phone at [435-319-0407](tel:435-319-0407).