

Advocates say 'we're doing what the state should be doing'

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Chris Murphy and Chrisy Selder know many of the sordid details by memory.

Most Saturdays, they meet at their Hillcrest area office, brew strong cups of Peet's coffee and go to work investigating local assisted living homes.

From this tiny sunlit space above a garden, the two women are leading a small but hard-hitting campaign to draw attention to a side of long-term care in San Diego County that most people have never seen.

At their fingertips are electronic files chronicling the stories of seniors at area facilities who died or were injured under suspicious circumstance.

Propelled by personal experience, they've posted thousands of files on their website. They counsel seniors and families seeking safe surroundings. They lock horns with state regulators and push prosecutors to bring charges.

"They began to tell me horror stories that I had no idea existed," said Paul Greenwood, the San Diego County deputy district attorney who prosecutes elder abuse.

Murphy, 67, of San Diego, and Selder, 34, of La Mesa, say they stepped up because they believe California is not protecting seniors in assisted living homes, which the state calls residential care facilities

for the elderly, or RCFEs.

They founded a not-for-profit group, Consumer Advocates for RCFE Reform, funded largely by Murphy and her husband.

Because the state does not post facility records online, the two made themselves regulars at the Mission Valley office of the state Department of Social Services, or DSS, which regulates assisted living homes.

There, aided by a few interns, they burned through three portable scanners to copy inspection reports and records of penalties and fines. Today, their website, rcferreform.org, displays reports for nearly every one of the 640 licensed assisted living homes in San Diego County.

"We're doing what the state should be doing," Murphy said.

Some area facilities have cared for residents for years without running afoul of the state with citations or fines, according to reports on the website.

At other homes, residents have been subjected to suspicious deaths, rapes, physical and verbal abuse, theft, medication errors and life-threatening bedsores.

Startled that virtually no local homes have been charged with crimes, Murphy and Selder started mailing records last year to state and local prosecutors. To date, they've passed along records of 83 unusual events.

Just a decade ago, the two Chrises, as they're nicknamed,



Chris Murphy (left) and Chrisy Selder founded Consumer Advocates for RCFE Reform, which pushes for improvements in residential care facilities for the elderly. PEGGY PEATTIE • U-T

knew almost nothing about assisted living.

Murphy's first encounter came in 2003 when she walked into a facility recommended by a local nursing home. She was searching for a home for her mother, then 88, weakened by ovarian cancer and suffering early dementia.

"I made the mistake that many people do. I looked at the chandeliers instead of the care," she said. "I didn't notice the dirt - only the seeming elegance of the place."

Then her mother died. Murphy declined to provide details, following a legal settlement she reached

with the home.

The experience, she said, convinced her to tell the public about the "chandelier effect," a term experts use to describe how people can be misled by the looks of some facilities, blinding them to potential health and safety flaws.

At the time, Murphy's résumé included two years of law school and 28 years as a defense industry contract administrator, but no background in long-term care.

So she enrolled in 2006 in a master's degree program in gerontology at San Diego State University. There, she and Selder met

in a gerontology policy class.

Selder's first lessons in aging came from her grandmother, who lived independently until she died at 96: At first, she was a champion of assisted living and worked for an RCFE management company. She became concerned, she said, when she saw inside a few homes.

"There was a woman on oxygen, bedridden," she recalled. "She's lying on the bed naked right after a bath. The windows were all open. She sat there for over an hour. I went and got a blanket for her."

When Selder went to work for a local home, her cynicism grew.

"That's when I began cluing in on how false the claims could be," she said.

Today, Selder, who has three young daughters, is back in school, training to be a paralegal in consumer law. She remains CARR's principal investigator.

"There are weeks I feel like, oh my God, I'm pushing this rock up a sand hill," Murphy said. "Then Chrisy comes, and I say, 'It's OK, there are two of us.'"

The two Chrises often get asked for advice from families choosing among assisted living homes. Murphy said she recently talked to a woman in her 80s who was thinking of leaving her paid-for condominium for a facility that Murphy knew had a history.

"She said she was tired of taking care of herself," Murphy recalled. "I had to give her a dose-of-reality slap."