

AT HOME More and more seniors find care with their kids

"It's our obligation to look after our parents'

BY DANA BARTHOLOMEW

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She took in Dad when his mind slipped, welcomed home a brother with Down syndrome and now cares for Mom, who has Alzheimer's disease. Each workday, Sandra Kilman also drives across the San Fernando Valley to baby-sit her 11-month-old granddaughter. "We're kind of used to caring", said Kilman, 56 of West Hills, a singer who, with her musician husband, Dennis, has centered her life around family. "I think it's our obligation to look after our parents."

The Kilmans join a growing number of Californians who support their moms or pops, including the so-called "sandwich generation" who must also care for children. In addition, a recent court decision buttresses a little known state law that requires able adults to care for their elderly indigent parents. As the cost of housing and health care soars in Los Angeles County, the number of seniors older than 85 is expected to double by 2020. As a result more working families will likely have to shoulder the burden of costly parental care.

"We work with a lot of families-they struggle, they do the best they can, but it's tough," said Anna Fenner, director of care management at ONEgeneration, a senior day-care and services center in Van Nuys. "The resources may not be there."

Each weekday morning, Sandra Kilman bathes and dresses her 94-year-old mother for the drive to the ONEgeneration Joy Center north of Lake Balboa. There, Margaret Starks, a regal woman with a glowing smile, joins 120 other seniors, most of whom suffer from dementia. You're looking good," Saul Cohen, 73, of Granada Hills, tells his silver-



Tina Birch/Staff Photographer

Sandra Kilman helps her 94-year-old mother, Margaret Starks, to ONEgeneration on a recent morning.

haired neighbor. "Every day you're looking better and better." "I like it," declared Starks, beaming from her wheelchair.

It was 17 years ago that Kilman took in her 80-year-old father- Bennie Starks Sr., a former big band leader from St. Louis- when his memory ebbed from dementia. After three years living at home, he died in a nursing home in 1993. "At the end," said Kilman, a former singer for Lou Rawls and such TV productions as "The Jacksons" and the Richard Pryor Show," "... he couldn't speak at all, God bless him, He'd open his mouth and nothing would come out."

Kilmans then took in Sandra's spirited half brother, Bennie Starks Jr., who later died of Down syndrome-related complications. Margaret Starks, who had raised Kilman by herself, moved home, then was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. Up to two years ago, she could remember the past but no longer. "She knows I'm special," Kilman said. "She doesn't always know that I'm her daughter, but she knows that I'm someone she can count on." Family support has costs the Kilmans hundreds of dollars each month for

nursing and day care. But it's worth it, they say. Their parents sacrificed for them. Now it's only fair they sacrifice for their parents. "The things we do for love," said Kilman, clutching her granddaughter, Gianna. "It's the most motivating thing in the world."

In California, the number of seniors older than 60 has shot up from 1.6 million in 1950 to 4.2 million in 1990, an increase of 157 percent, according to the state Department of Aging. By 2040, that number is expected to hit 12.5 million. With low-income housing difficult to obtain and free nursing homes available to only the poorest residents, experts on aging say that it could be up to adult children to pick up the slack.

In Los Angeles, it now costs \$63,875 a year, on average, for nursing home care, according to CNNMoney.com and \$18,300 for assisted living. At-home day care costs \$150-\$200 a day. At ONEgeneration, it costs \$86 per day for senior day care, much of it paid for by relatives. Denise Kee-White, a social service manager for adult day-care programs, said fewer seniors can afford the rising cost of living in L.A. As a result, many are moving into the homes of their children. And it is the children who pick up much of the tab—from extra wheelchairs to lost dentures and eyeglasses.

"That's why most people are moving back with their families," Kee-White said. "They can't afford to live any other way." Senior advocates agreed.

"As usual, the folks who really get hit are the middle class and the working class," said Mark Beach, a spokesman for AARP in Sacramento. "The fact of the matter is, there aren't many resources.

"If you're not defined as low-income, if you don't

qualify for Medi-Cal, your long-term care won't be paid for." It was a decision by the 3rd District Court of Appeal last month that highlighted a parental support law that had even escaped the notice of AARP and other senior advocates.

It turns out that, in California, the law states that every adult child who, if financially able, fails to pro-

vide food, clothing, shelter and medical help to an indigent parent is guilty of a misdemeanor.

The ruling on an ugly divorce case in Northern California gives great weight to the law in courts throughout the state. Legal experts say that with the rising cost of supporting an aging population, a legal system geared for seeking child support will also



Sandra Kilman helps her mother, Margaret Starks, 94 and an Alzheimer's patient, out of the car. "She doesn't always know that I'm her daughter, but she knows that I'm someone she can count on.

Tina Birch/Staff Photographer

swing toward senior support.

"The principal point of this decision underscores that we have not only a mora, but a legal obligation to support our parents," said Glendalee Scully, a professor of law at McGeorge School of Law in Sacramento. "There will be a gradual opening of mechanisms to track down people who won't pay voluntarily to help their parents.

"The hot button here is, when a parent goes on Medi-Cal benefits, will the state seek to enforce the parents' support rights and sue the children for reimbursement?" added Ruth Phelps, a practicing elder law attorney who teaches elder law at Loyola Law School. "So far, the state hasn't done that." But for Sandra and Dennis Kilman, taking care of her families has proved the ultimate reward. "I've had the feeling that I can't do this much longer, but those feelings have been fleeting," she said. "Because the bottom line is ... I can do this for these folks that I love."