

Testimony of Peg Lahmeyer

Special Committee on Aging

United States Senate

May 20, 2021

Thank you to the Senate Special Committee on Aging, Chairman, Senator Casey and Ranking Member, Senator Scott. Thank you for the opportunity to testify about my experiences as a caregiver and the founder and Executive Director of The ARK of SC for 25+ years

Growing up in rural Alabama with older parents and much older siblings, I witnessed how our family and extended family cared for each other and nurtured each other during tough times and good times. These impactful life experiences shaped my life.

My family expanded to Summerville, SC with a wonderful husband, 6 children and step children to include the adoption in 1986 of an “at risk” teenager.

My mother was diagnosed at age 76 with Alzheimer’s. Multiple visits showed the continual decline for both of my parents. My father, age 80, was Mother’s caregiver for 8 years when he called to say he needed help. We moved her to a long term care facility in Montgomery which was 45 miles from my dad. It was devastating for both of them. My father died in 1990 at the age of 90. We moved Mother to live with us. I was granted Conservatorship. Working full time, I resigned to be her caregiver. I worked part time delivering newspapers so I could be at home during the day.

After discussing the plight and needs for caregivers to “have a break” and support, I was asked to start a group social respite at our church. Brookdale National Group Respite Program provided seed grant funding. In January 1996 The ARK opened its doors.

Needing skill care, my mother moved into an Alzheimer’s specific long term care in 1995 before The ARK opened. She died in 1997 at the age of 93. Her legacy lives on through The ARK.

I sought every opportunity to speak to ANYONE - church, civic, fraternal organizations, businesses, governmental groups, clubs and anywhere there was an audience. The local Chapter of the Alzheimer's Association in Charleston was just starting and I became involved in many of their educational committees, fundraising, and eventually as a Board Member.

As a previous business person, I believe in the power of the Chamber of Commerce. Becoming a member has opened many doors for support and growth. Nonprofits are essential to the community.

The ARK provides so much more than respite to five counties in the Lowcountry of SC.

Services include:

- **4 Respite half days a week in Summerville**
- **Bus Service provided since 2000**
- **A Satellite respite center in Harleyville weekly**
- **4 support groups in Berkeley and Dorchester counties (one specific to wives only)**
- **An Early Memory Loss Program weekly**

The NOAH (Neighborhood Outreach Alzheimer's Help) Project provides:

- **Caregiver educational classes, memory screenings, health and resource events**
- **Law Enforcement/ First Responders training – Evidenced based and Certified through the S.C. Criminal Justice Academy**
- **Workshops and train the trainer programs, both in person and virtual**
 - **Powerful Tools for Caregivers (PTC) – 6 week evidenced based**
 - **Class Leader Training (CLT) for Professionals**

All of these services are provided by 5 FT and 4 PT staff. They are devoted, passionate, fun loving, supportive and caring.

In 2018, we acquired a home to move our services and staff to enable expansion.

Through the shutdown and pandemic, our social program closed for seven months. The Staff immediately started calling/emailing caregivers, creating fun

activity baskets that were delivered to their homes. Zoom was our salvation for workshops and PTC/CLT, memory screenings, and support groups. Caregivers and families felt less isolated and connected. The CLT classes reached as far as Alaska and one in July 2021 includes British Columbia professionals.

When we returned to full time programming, we saw the decline in our ARK families because of the isolation and lack of socialization and realize how important our programs are for caregivers and care receivers' well-being. Now, we are seeing the effects of dementia to include not only the baby boomers but now the millennials are experiencing caregiving and in some cases early onset dementia.

Funding for grassroots organizations is paramount. Additional state funding for Aging services is critical especially for Alzheimer's support programs. Families need to afford in home care as well. With the support of South Carolina's Office on Aging we have been able to build our education program. More funding for all aging services is needed as the numbers are growing each and every day.

Thank you