

May 17, 2018 — VVCC helps isolated senior

Three hours. That's all the time Laura Bambusch had to avert potential tragedy. "It was one of the toughest days," said Bambusch, care coordinator for Verde Valley Caregivers Coalition (VVCC). "It's really on my mind."

Recently, a local resident with severe Alzheimer's had her water shut off, an all-too-common occurrence when dementia patients forget to – or even recall how to – pay their bills. With unseasonably warm spring temperatures expected in the following days, with no apparent straightforward solution to the problem, and with no one around to help Marie (not her real name), something had to be done and fast. As with any potential emergency involving the area's high-needs senior population living independently, VVCC stepped in and responded swiftly, led by Bambusch.

"When I started working on this, it was 2 p.m. Friday and I'd been told I had until 5 p.m. to get to the water company and make arrangements to pay the bill," she said. "But I was out on a hilltop. It's hard to even get to her house. It involves going over a very rural road. I was up there and had to get back to where I could print out an email with the documents I needed her to sign. I had to get her water and [foodstuffs] to take back up with me. All this time, I'm racing the clock." Turns out, Marie had also lost her wallet, including her driver's license, and her dog had run away. In addition, the house was disorderly, more evidence of Marie's need for ongoing assistance from VVCC, not just on this day.

"Just as I was about to leave around 3:30, I got a call from the water company manager who said he'd turn her water on that afternoon if I came in Monday morning with arrangements to pay," recounted Bambusch. "That was both one of the worst days and one of the best days because I got the water back on."

Very high-stress situations like this are all too common among the high-needs senior population living at home. Ensuring VVCC clients or "neighbors" are never left isolated is a fundamental part of the organization's mission. VVCC Executive Director Kent Ellsworth said many seniors suffer quietly and hidden from view. "Their family members help as much as they can," he adds, "but many live out of state. They do know we're here and that's how we found Marie."

In addition to VVCC's transportation services and proactive programs like loaning Guardian Angel emergency alert units, VVCC is also a first point of contact for vulnerable neighbors, either finding solutions in concert with other local resource providers or directly addressing just about any kind of urgent situation. Previously, Marie had been a schoolteacher and financial advisor. "These are very intelligent people who were very successful in their day," Bambusch said. "But now their needs are high and they are struggling to cope."

Helping those most vulnerable is Bambusch's calling in life.

"I was brought in specifically to work with the high-needs clients, the ones with the most issues so I feel like a crusader, quite often, where I am working with seniors who have no family, no one nearby, who are isolated, who are suffering from dementia.

Difficult cases like Marie's require passion and perseverance, but they also take a toll. "I had started thinking "if I don't get this done, how can I enjoy my weekend, knowing she's up there with nothing?" said Bambusch.

But then, resolution brought relief. "When they said they'd turn that water on, I wept tears of joy!"

