Alzheimer's assistance
Many agencies offer support to caregivers

Just like former President Ronald Reagan, hundreds of thousands of Americans spend the last years of their lives quietly waging a battle with Alzheimer's disease.

For the most part, their struggle against the irreversible brain disorder goes unseen, but it can exact a heavy toll on those who love and care for them.

More than 70 percent of those with Alzheimer's live at home, where family and friends provide for their care. As the disease progresses, it places growing physical, emotional and financial stress on those caregivers.

That's why more than 200 local chapters of the Alzheimer's Association have joined forces with other agencies to provide resources and support to care for the caregivers.

Access to the resources is as simple as a call to the national organization's toll-free, 24-hour caregiver support line, (800) 717-3277, or a visit to the Web site, www.alz.org.

Caregivers for the estimated 16,000 residents in the 11-county North Central Florida region who have Alzheimer's may call the area office at (352) 372-6266 or (800) 272-3900, regional director Richard Mitchell said Thursday. Callers will be directed to a variety of resources and support groups.

In fact, the North Central Florida office Thursday will host a free, daylong community program, "Caring for the Caregiver," at The Village, and a limited number of spaces are still available. For more information, Mitchell said, just contact the office.

Here are some of the many area resources that are available:

**AlzOnline**
As people become increasingly isolated by the demands of caring for an Alzheimer's patient, they often have questions that go unanswered.

That's where AlzOnline can help, according to administrative
coordinator Jeff Loomis. The online caregiver support site is available around the clock.

"Sometimes a caregiver doesn't get a moment to take stock until 1 or 2 in the morning," Loomis said. "When they ask, 'What do I do now?' we want to be ready with the answer."

Florida's Department of Elder Affairs and the University of Florida Center for Telehealth have teamed up to create a Web site where caregivers may participate in online classes, lectures, message boards and referrals to community services designed to make their jobs easier.

Recognizing that not everyone has access to a computer, the program is available by phone. Information is provided in English or Spanish.

"We get 6,000 to 8,000 visits to the site per month," Loomis said. "The magic of the Internet is that you don't even have to be in Florida to access these services. The only thing that is Florida-specific, by counties, is our resource list."

**Al'z Place**
It is one of only four model adult day care facilities in the state serving those with Alzheimer's disease and other memory disorders.

Created in 1996, Al'z Place is housed in the fellowship hall of First Christian Church Disciples of Christ across from Santa Fe Community College, 3411 NW 83rd St.

Al'z Place provides a structured and stimulating program for the clients it serves, incorporating music, puzzles, active games, even massage therapy into the daily routine.

"We are also here to provide education and links to other resources to reduce the stress on caregivers," program director Jean Wood said.

Funded through grants and donations, the program serves Alachua County residents. It provides one staff member for every three clients and is licensed to care for 26 people. There's always a waiting list.

**Altrusa House**
Altrusa House, 2002 NW 36th Ave. in Gainesville, is a licensed adult day health care facility, which means nurses are on staff to serve clients age 18 and older.
Registered nurse Linda Frey said Altrusa House is licensed to serve up to 55 people with Alzheimer's and/or physical disabilities and at the moment, there is no waiting list.

The facility draws from Alachua and surrounding counties and referrals often come through local physicians, Frey said. There is a charge for services and some sponsorships are available.

**Family Caregiver Support Program**

Florida's Department of Elder Affairs and the Alzheimer's Association offer caregiver training, support groups, community outreach and a number of other programs. Some reimbursement is available for respite care, prescription medications and consumable medical supplies for caregivers of those who are aged 60 or older. For information, call toll-free, (800) 717-3277.

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Reference: