

PASADENA WEEKLY

Keeping It In The Family

June 11, 2001 by Natalie Dunbar

A grieving daughter tells how a new bill would have helped her to cope with her father's illness and death.

A bill co-authored by Assemblywoman Carol Liu would guarantee that medical facilities would make a reasonable effort to contact a patient's next of kin upon hospitalization. On Memorial Day 1998, one of the last days of my father's life, I was shopping at a local discount store with a friend who was visiting from my central New Jersey hometown. "Remind me to call my dad when we get back to the house," I told her. We were expecting company that afternoon. I was concerned we'd get caught up in the festivities and it would be too late in the day to check on my dad, who'd just returned home from rehabilitation after a lengthy bout with congestive heart failure and undergoing an angioplasty.

Three years later, and I can only say that it was providence that led me to the phone after that brief shopping trip. I called and called and I called. And the phone rang, and rang. And continued to ring. I racked my brain, nervously joking that dad must have been out partying, making up for lost time after being cooped up in rehab. I knew in my heart of hearts this simply was not true. My dad, while a jazz musician of some notoriety, was rarely seen in a club or at a party. And I'd spoken with him once twice a day for at least three months -including the day before Memorial Day. He never mentioned going out.

I was scared. And I was in California some 3,000 miles away from the New Jersey home I'd grown up in, and where, after making about six more phone calls, I learned that my father lay alone on his bedroom floor suffering from what would later be diagnosed as a massive stroke. My dad eventually got to the phone that day -- I distinctly remember counting 14 rings -- and he told me in a barely audible voice that he'd fallen down in his room some 10 to 12 hours before. He was very much alone. I couldn't call 911 from Pasadena.

And although dad said he did not want to go back to the hospital, my friend called her mother at her New Jersey home -- just five minutes from where my dad lay, effectively dying -- and set in motion a patchwork "continuum of care" that would at least guarantee he'd get the immediate care he needed.

Paramedics stabilized dad, and kept him comfortable. Friends came to the house to see to his needs until my son and I could get there. But by the next morning, the stroke began to ravage his body. As dad was taken to the hospital that had virtually become a

second home over the last six or so months, and I made my way to LAX, I shuddered to think what would have happened if I hadn't been able to get my dad on the phone that Memorial Day. And as my son and I glided across the country in the night skies to what I knew would be our last visit, I cried conflicted tears of relief that the hospital kept in close contact with me, and allowed me the opportunity to reach my father's bedside before he succumbed to his illness.

A mother and daughter living in nearby Studio City went through this very scenario, with tragically different results. The elder woman's mother was hospitalized in an Illinois hospital where she eventually died alone -- before her daughter and granddaughter ever got a chance to see her, six days after she was admitted, mere hours after they were contacted.

Senate Bill 1041, co-authored by Assemblywoman Liu and State Senator Jackie Speier was introduced in February as a result of their grief. If passed, it will require acute care facilities to make a reasonable effort to contact a patient's agent, surrogate or family member within 24 hours to make health care decisions on the patient's behalf.

Assemblywoman Liu, whose own father died during the primaries, said the bill seemed like a reasonable thing to do. "It's common sense," Liu said, adding that like many others, she thought such requirements already existed. Currently only four states have enacted similar laws -- Hawaii, Minnesota, Texas and Utah. Liu said testimonials she heard in support of SB 1041 were remarkable. One woman said though she was clearly listed on her mother's hospital chart as the next of kin, her mother died before she was ever contacted.

People often speak of the importance of making closure when a loved one dies. I'm not so sure that you can ever close the gaping hole that's left after the death of someone you love. But if this bill is passed, at the very least, surviving family members may be able to avoid the emotional conflict and feelings of guilt for living so far away in the first place.