

HEALTH

Rose took care of her sister with dementia. NJ stepped in. Now Rose faces homelessness

6-minute read

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Key Points

As Rose's sister worsened, she often called the police. That led the state to step in.

Rose feels her sister was stolen from her by the government, and that she could provide better care than the nursing home the state put her sister in.

When Olga Cherbetko suffered a stroke 18 months ago and showed signs of cognitive decline, her sister Rose Golembiewski — who had moved into Olga's West Milford house — became her caregiver.

Rose, 82, would cook, shop, pay bills, administer medicine and take Olga, 81, to doctors' appointments.

But as Olga's condition worsened, her behavior became more erratic. The sisters would often quarrel. And that would trigger Olga to call the police.

Those calls set in motion a slow but powerful bureaucratic process that resulted in New Jersey state government taking guardianship of Olga last year and remanding her to a nursing home after emergency responders thought she may have suffered another stroke in December.

Story continues below photo gallery

Rose said she was never given the chance to contest the government's guardianship. Passaic County officials said she was. Rose now faces homelessness, after the state Department of Human Services told her in January that it is going to sell Olga's home to help pay for her nursing home care.

"I don't know what's going to happen to me, and I don't really care," Rose said. "All I want is for my sister to come home. She's wasting away."

The story of the two sisters puts a spotlight on the struggle to care for an ailing loved one — and also raises questions about when and how authorities should intervene if they believe the care is insufficient.

These questions will likely become more frequent in the coming decades as [more New Jerseyans enter their senior years](#) than ever before. It is expected there will be 3 million residents over the age of 60 in the Garden State at the end of this decade — an increase of 1 million.

Polls show that New Jerseyans overwhelmingly want to [spend their last years in the comfort of their home](#). But even with home care services growing, situations arise that make it difficult — such as a major physical decline or unpredictable behavior brought on by dementia.

Rose feels as if Olga was stolen away from her by the government. She has tried to hire several lawyers but has been turned away because they either don't believe she has a good case or she doesn't have enough money for a retainer.

She contacted NorthJersey.com to tell her story "so this doesn't happen to other families."

'I never got the chance to fight it'

It is not known what evidence the government gave to a judge in August to obtain guardianship of Olga. The Department of Human Services would not comment on

the case, citing privacy concerns. Court records for guardianship cases are not available to the public because they often involve children and adults such as Olga who are considered incapacitated.

But West Milford police reports obtained by NorthJersey.com through the Open Public Records Act show a cascading series of events that began with police responding to Olga's calls, then continued with the Passaic County Board of Social Services getting involved, and eventually ending with the stark reality that Olga will likely never come home again.

"It was like the government just swooped in and stole her away from me," Rose said. "And I never got the chance to fight it."

Shortly after Olga's husband, Nick, [died in 2017](#), Rose moved into the house to keep her sister company and help organize her finances. Rose had been widowed for decades, and neither she nor Olga had children.

The sisters would often argue. Rose eventually moved into an apartment in Wayne and lived mostly on her Social Security income. As the rent climbed, she went back to living with Olga about three years ago.

Police respond to home at least 14 times in 2 years

Olga was still very active into her late 70s, working at Panera Bread as a dishwasher. But by 2023, Olga had trouble remembering things and completing simple tasks, Rose said. Olga became easily agitated and would often call the police.

Since January 2023, West Milford police responded to at least 14 calls to the home. The calls were mostly centered around small arguments between the two sisters and Olga's frequent misunderstanding of the situation, police reports showed.

They ranged from a fight over vacuuming the car and a misplaced checkbook to accusations of minor pushing and shoving between the two.

Each time, police determined that neither sister showed signs of injury and that there was no evidence of any domestic violence. “They agitate each other and want the other to leave,” a police officer wrote after visiting the home in May 2023.

Police also wrote that they observed cluttered hallways and rooms that made it difficult to maneuver around the home.

Rose said she tried her best to keep the house clean and organized, but it became difficult after Olga had a stroke in October 2023. Olga was taken to Chilton Memorial Hospital and spent some time rehabbing at a West Milford nursing home before returning home before the holidays.

The frequency of her calls to police grew after her return — sometimes with two in a single day. Police would often note in their reports that they were regular visitors to the house.

Police note garbage and belongings piled through house

During a March 2024 visit to the home, police said, Olga appeared disheveled while standing in a neighbor’s driveway after another argument with Rose. “It should be noted that the residence is not sanitary,” police wrote in their report. “There are belongings and garbage in piles throughout the interior of the residence. There are only small pathways leading from one room to the next.”

Rose said the house was cluttered but clean. “Believe me — I’ve seen hoarding on TV,” she said. “My sister does have a lot of stuff, but it was clean house and you had no problem moving around. There’s a difference between hoarding and clutter. I was always cleaning the bathrooms. I always cleaned the kitchen floor.”

Over the months when they responded to calls, police contacted Passaic County Adult Protective Services, the township health department and St. Joseph’s crisis response team for assistance.

Rose said she and Olga were interviewed by lawyers and doctors at the home over the course of a few months last year. She said she was told there would be a hearing to determine guardianship of Olga. Rose said she was prepared to go to court, but then a social worker from the county's Adult Protective Services said someone would bring a laptop to her home that day so she could participate in the proceeding via videoconference.

Rose said no one ever came that day.

Passaic County Board of Social Services officials said they had received a complaint in April about Olga's well-being. Rose did not contest a guardianship complaint sent in June by certified mail, but did acknowledge receipt of it.

The Board of Social Services "follows a court-supervised legal process to ensure that any decision regarding guardianship is made carefully and with the individual's best interests in mind," Lindsay Reed, a county spokeswoman, said in a statement.

"This process involves providing proper notice, affording relevant parties the opportunity to respond or contest, and ultimately, a decision made by the Superior Court of New Jersey," Reed said.

Judge gives guardianship of Olga to state

In a nine-page order on Aug. 9, state Superior Court Judge Thomas LaConte gave the state guardianship over Olga. The order made no mention of Rose or anything specific about why the state sought or was granted guardianship.

It said reports from a lawyer, a psychiatrist and a psychologist showed that Olga "lacks sufficient capacity to govern herself and manage her affairs."

County officials said there was no hearing, and the matter was decided on paper.

"In this case, the court reviewed the matter and rendered a decision based on the information and recommendations presented," Reed said. "If any individual

believes they are more suitable to serve as a guardian, they may petition the court to be considered as a substitute guardian."

Rose said she had no idea what had transpired until a care manager from Human Services tried to conduct a welfare check on Olga weeks after the decision. Rose refused to let the care manager into the house. That caused police to intervene, but they said they had no authority to force Rose to open the door.

In early December, Olga almost fell as the sisters were decorating the house for Christmas. Olga was taken again to Chilton where she was tested to see if she had suffered another stroke. Rose said the tests came back negative. Olga was then transferred to the same nursing home for rehabilitation.

Olga 'wasting away' in a nursing home

When Rose was informed that her sister would be staying at the nursing home permanently, she became very upset. "She's my sister," she said. "How could they take her away like that?"

Rose said Olga has lost more than 20 pounds while at the nursing home. "She's just wasting away there," she said. "I can take a lot better care of her at home."

Rose said the state is not paying Olga's bills on time. The home's phone line was recently turned off, she said.

On Jan. 15, Rose received a letter from the Department of Human Services telling her that Olga's house would need to be sold under federal Medicaid guidelines to pay for Olga's care.

Rose would be allowed to live there temporarily as long as she cooperates with a real estate agent and the state Office of the Public Guardian and paid all the household bills. But the letter said she would have to leave the house within 30 days after a contract is signed by a buyer.

Rose said she will likely end up living in her car — at 82 years old. She doesn't know what will happen to Olga's dog and cat if she's forced from the home.

Most of all, she worries about her sister.

Despite the arguments and Olga's decline, there was genuine love between the two, Rose said.

"I love my sister," Rose said. "I should be there for her until the end."