

TOP STORY

TOPICAL

Could anything have prevented an Omaha man from killing his beloved grandmother?

Molly Ashford

Dec 29, 2024

Even as she watched him cycle through jails and treatment facilities for nearly a decade, Linda Walter could never be convinced to give up on her grandson, Gage.

Once, she paid his bail in the days before Christmas, saying no one deserves to spend the holiday in a cell. After Gage was kicked out of her home for stealing, she would still sneak him in to cook for him and let him sleep on the couch.

“My wife was soft-hearted,” Linda’s husband of 50 years, Jim Walter, said.

“She loved that boy,” her son, Scott, said. “She loved him more than anybody did.”

The Killings: He bludgeoned the woman he loved most

On the afternoon of Aug. 13, 2022, Gage arrived at his grandparents’ Omaha house with a hammer. Tormented by what he describes as voices in his head, Gage bludgeoned Linda to death before moving into the bedroom of his bedridden 93-year-old great-grandmother, Marceline Teeters, and doing the same.

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Two bodies were found near 16th and Frederick Streets on Aug. 13, 2022, and police later identified them as those of Linda Walter and her mother, Marceline Teeters.

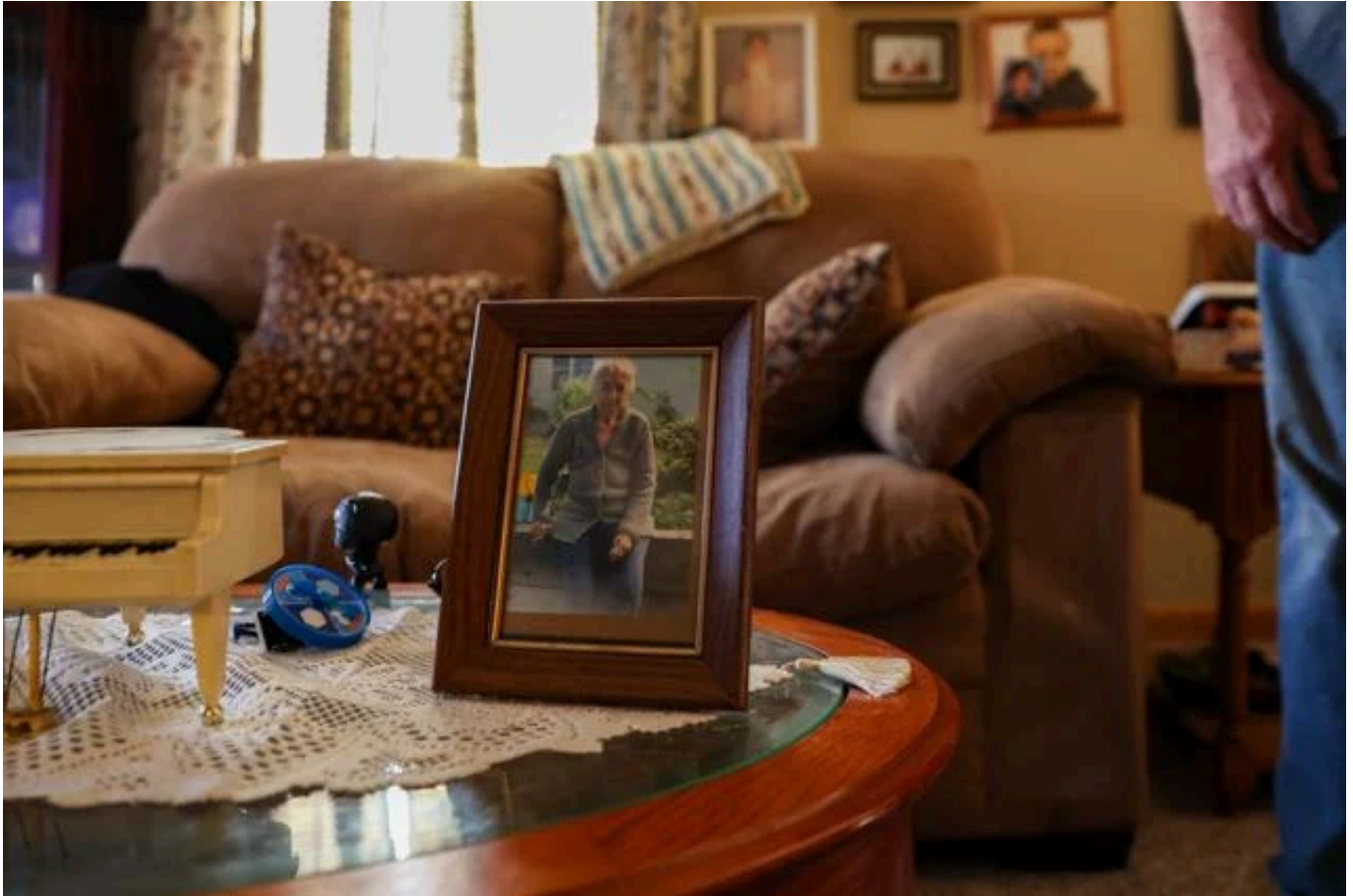
CHRIS MACHIAN, THE WORLD-HERALD

Jim was away on the day of the slayings. At Linda's urging, he took a trip with his son Scott and a handful of family and friends to South Dakota to go fishing. Before they hit the road, Linda sneaked an extra kiss.

The couple lived together in a small southeast Omaha bungalow for more than 50 years. They met when Jim, then 20 years old, found a lost puppy on Leavenworth Street. He wanted to keep it, but was convinced to put an ad on the radio to see if someone was missing the hound. Linda called.

When Jim went to return the dog, Linda opened the door. He fell in love in an instant. They were married in 1970 and had three kids — Scott, Jamie and Chris — who had kids, who had kids. Linda reveled in being a grandmother and great-grandmother.

Around 2010, they took in Marceline, Linda's mother, who was then beginning a long battle with dementia. By 2022, she was deteriorating fast; she was largely bedridden and would lash out at Jim and Linda, who made the decision to place her in a long-term care facility.



A framed photo of Marceline Teeters, Jim Walter's mother-in-law, is displayed on the coffee table in the living room of Walter's Omaha home on Nov. 7. Gage Walter, her great-grandson, killed her in 2022.

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Marceline was to move out of the home on Aug. 15, 2022, the same day Linda was set to start her new job as an elementary school cook. A career cook, Linda was thrilled about the new gig. She spent the weeks prior to her start date preparing for the physical test to prove she could lift the heavy boxes in the school cafeteria. She passed easily; at 70, she seemed strong as ever.

It was not to be. A few hours after Gage fled the scene in Linda's red PT Cruiser, Jamie arrived at the home to help Linda with her phone. She found her mother on the floor in a pool of blood. Her injuries were extensive. It looked as if she had been shot.

Jamie ran out of the house screaming.

Jamie was hysterical. On the phone, Scott heard her say: *Mom was shot*. A neighbor took the phone. *What are you saying?* Scott asked. *What are you talking about?* But it's all a blur, now, and no one can remember what they knew when. Did they know Linda was dead when they packed into the car to drive back to Omaha? Did they know Marceline had been attacked, too? Two years later, as Scott recounts the grueling drive home, he twists a thick rubber band around his fingers so tightly that it breaks.

Gage's father, Chris, was the first to suspect that his son was responsible.

"I told his attorney that (Gage) is going to hurt someone," Chris **told The World-Herald** on the evening of the killings. "Then he attacked and killed the two people who loved him the most in this world. I didn't know he was going to hurt them, but I knew it was going to be someone."



Briana Lohrenz, Jim Walter's granddaughter, right, holds the hand of her aunt, Jamie Kirschbaum, as she wipes a tear from her eye in Jim's house in Omaha, on Thursday, Nov. 7, 2024. Jaime discovered her mother and grandmother, Linda Walter and Marceline Teeters, dead on Saturday, Aug. 13, 2022.

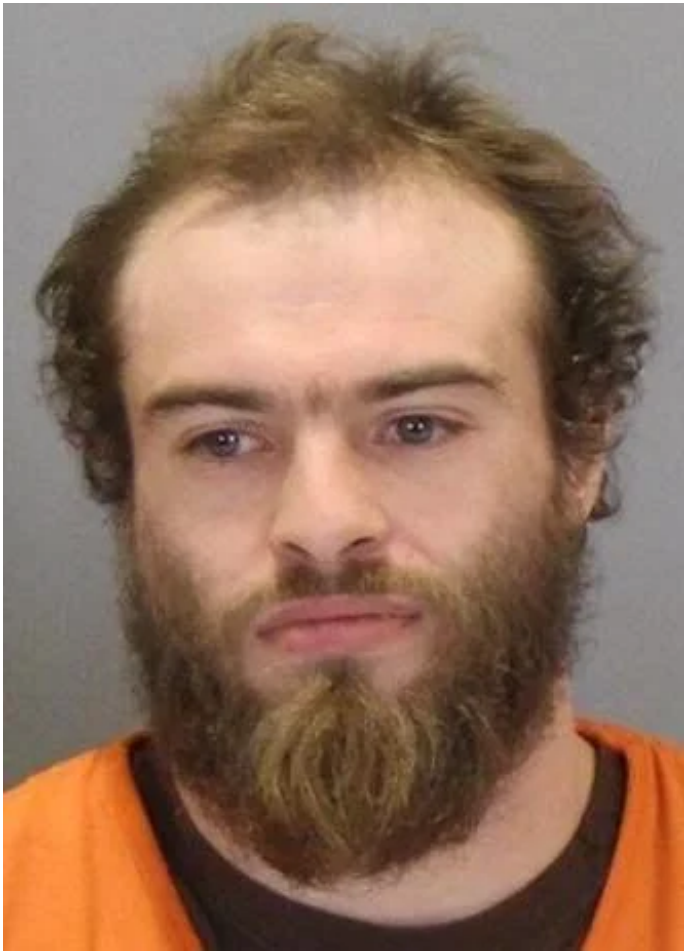
The reality set in slower for other members of the family.

"There was just no way in my mind that he would hurt her," Scott said this year.

Gage was not captured until the day after the killings; he fled the scene and led police in Des Moines on a 30-mile, high-speed chase before barricading himself in a church and surrendering after a four-hour standoff. He was interviewed by detectives with Iowa's Criminal Investigations Bureau and the Omaha Police Department's homicide unit, according to Omaha Police Lt. Nicholas Andrews.

During the "lengthy" interview, Gage admitted to the killings, but there was a "mental health aspect that was evident," Andrews said.

Gage fought extradition to Douglas County. The family learned of an additional attack: The night before the killings, Gage attacked a man with a hammer outside of an Omaha supermarket. The man was left with critical injuries, including multiple fractured bones in his face, according to a police report. Gage was charged with attempted first-degree murder.



Gage Walter

At his first court appearance, **Gage appeared untethered**, repeatedly interrupting the judge with comments about the Cold War and body-snatchers and nanobots. Attorneys detailed Gage's background: A long history of documented mental health issues. Multiple diagnoses. The subject of multiple Board of Mental Health petitions. A felony record. Three domestic assaults. Drug possession. One failure to appear conviction.

He was held without bail.

Earlier this year, after a series of court-ordered psychiatric evaluations **found that Gage was criminally insane** when he committed the slayings, he was found not responsible by reason of insanity. He was involuntarily committed to the Lincoln Regional Center, a state-run psychiatric facility, where he will remain until a judge determines that he is no longer a risk to himself and others.

Consistent court involvement, multiple inpatient stays for mental health treatment and a documented pattern of escalating violent behavior over a period of years was not enough to prevent the brutal attack on the person Gage loved most.



Jim Walter looks around his kitchen in Omaha, on Tuesday, Nov. 26, 2024. His late wife, Linda Walter, would spend hours cooking and was known in her family to be an exceptional cook.

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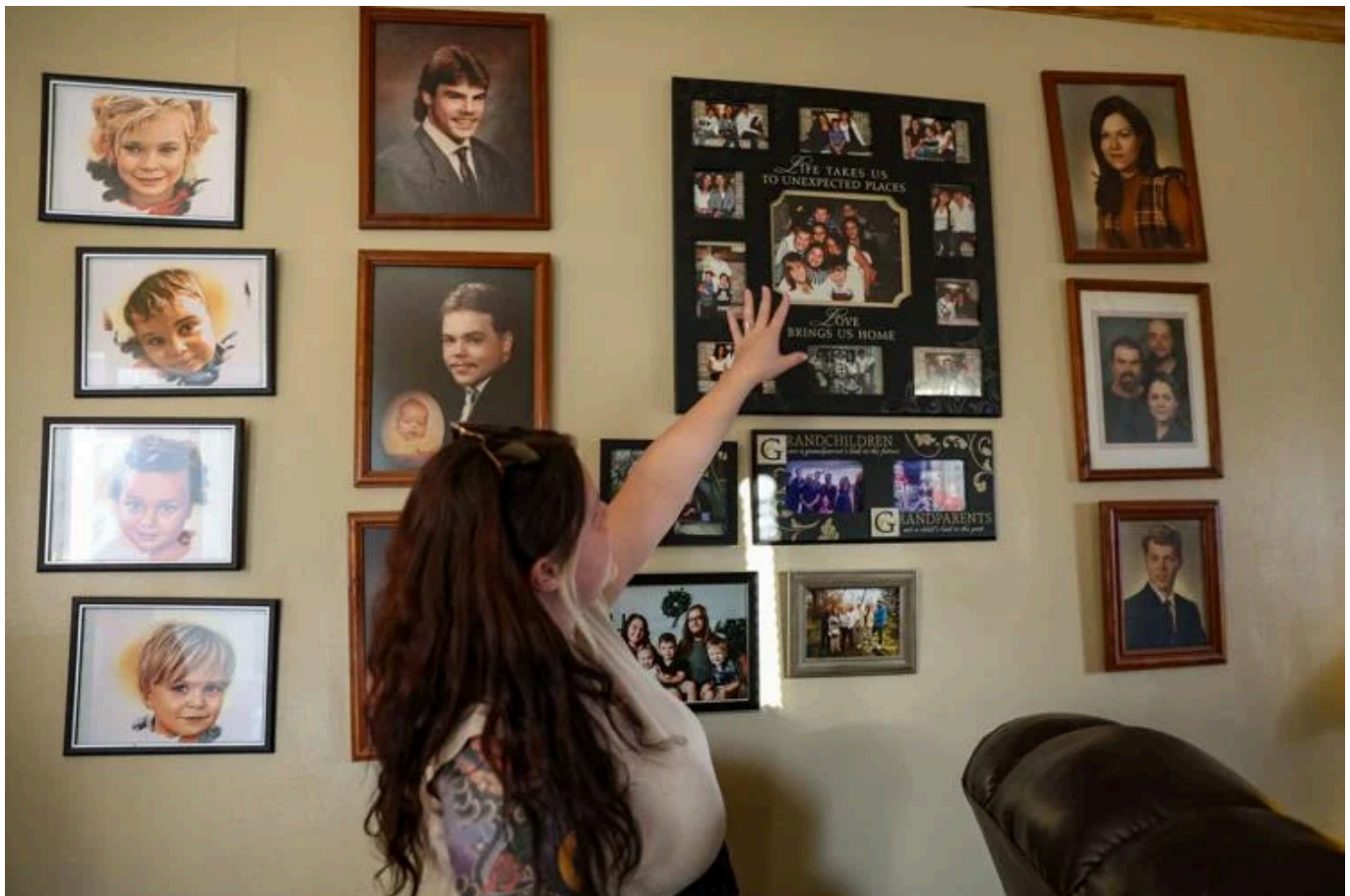
"Why didn't anyone do something before this happened?" Shelby, Gage's cousin, said.

"She was my favorite family member," Gage told the Omaha World-Herald during an interview from the Lincoln Regional Center. "I loved her probably the most, and that's what's so sad about all of this."

The Backstory: A pattern of violence and many diagnoses

In Jim's home, a few photos of Gage remain on the wall. In one, he is a teenager, smiling broadly at the bottom of a dogpile of cousins, his brown hair swooping into a bowl cut. In another, he is a baby dressed in black-and-white checkered overalls,

propped up against his cousin Shelby.



Shelby Walter, Jim Walter's granddaughter, points to a frame with family photos in Jim's Omaha house on Nov. 7. The picture frame has a quote that reads, "Life takes us to unexpected places. Love brings us home."

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"Being as close in age as we were, I always tried to maintain that relationship with him," Shelby said. "But he gravitated toward bad people. I think that's a big reason as to why he started using drugs — because it's easier to have friendships with people who are in that kind of life."

Gage and the rest of the Walter family tell somewhat conflicting narratives of Gage's childhood. Interviewed family members said he was a loner who had little interest in making friends or participating in family events. Gage said he had a difficult relationship with his parents, who would physically restrain him when he had violent outbursts as a child, which caused him distress.

Appearing on a Zoom call from the psychiatric facility where he will spend an undetermined number of the coming years, Gage, now 29, said the first time he remembers being hospitalized was in the third grade when he hit a teacher who grabbed him by the wrists. He spent a few days in Immanuel Hospital, which kickstarted a lifetime of therapy and inpatient stays.

Throughout the years, Gage said, he's had a number of diagnoses: Paranoid schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, Asperger's syndrome (a mild form of Autism Spectrum Disorder), bipolar disorder with psychotic tendencies. At the state psychiatric facility, he is being treated for bipolar disorder and substance use disorder, and he takes an antipsychotic medication used to treat mania and schizophrenia in adults.

Gage began smoking marijuana as a teenager, which he said remained his drug of choice for his adult life. Persistent marijuana use has been shown in a number of recent studies to cause or significantly exacerbate **symptoms of schizophrenia and other psychotic disorders, particularly in young men.**

The Walter family suspects that he was also taking harder drugs over the years, and he was twice arrested for possessing methamphetamine, though Gage denies being on drugs at the time of the killings.



A photo of Gage Walter, right, and his siblings, Seth Walter, left, and Haley Walter, center, is displayed in Jim Walter's house in Omaha, on Tuesday, Nov. 26, 2024. The photo was taken at Christmas in 2009.

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At 19 years old, in 2014, Gage made his first appearance in the adult legal system when he was charged with multiple misdemeanors for disturbing the peace and criminal mischief. He was placed on diversion, but was removed from the program after testing positive for THC. Court records show he spent some time in an addiction treatment center. Eventually, he spent a few months in the Sarpy County Jail.

Petitions for protection orders against Gage detail a pattern of violence against those closest to him. His then-wife said in 2017 that Gage busted her lip, stomped on her neck and threatened to choke and stab their young child. His maternal grandmother wrote that Gage was “talking about being the Devil and Hitler” after assaulting her and holding her hostage in her home for an hour and a half in 2018. In 2020, Jim wrote that Gage hit his father in the head with a hammer, threw a glass bottle at the door and threatened to kill people. In a protection order filed less than six months

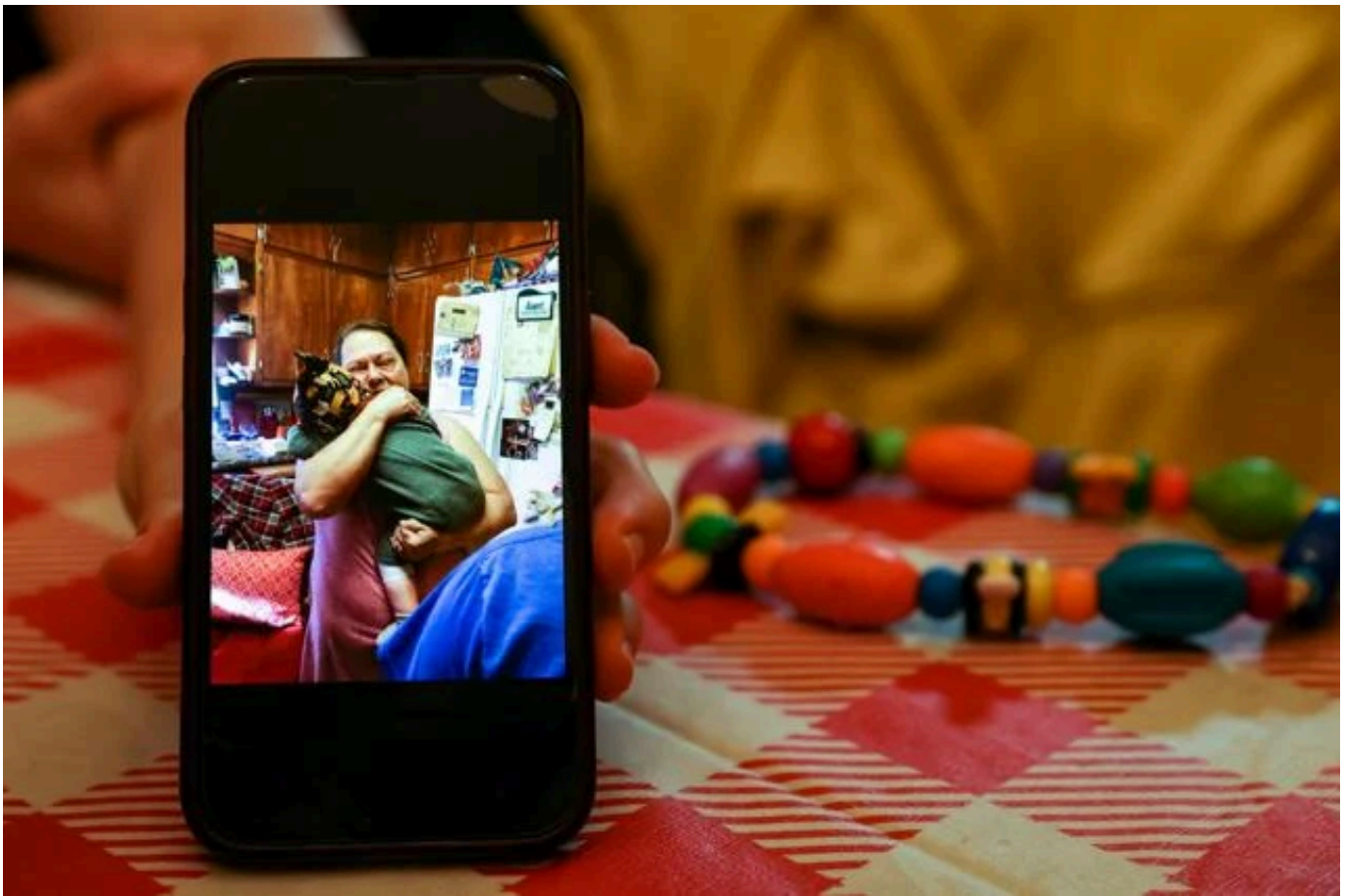
before the killings, Gage's maternal grandmother said Gage jumped into the backseat of her car, grabbed her in a chokehold and threatened to kill multiple family members.

Court records show that the courts were keenly aware of Gage's mental instability in the months and years before the killings. But despite months in jail, hospitalizations and court-ordered drug treatment, the system had limited options to keep him locked away or force him to get help.

Those limits were most evident in Gage's 2022 conviction for meth possession. He was ordered to report to an inpatient drug treatment facility, which court records indicate he never did. After a short custodial sanction in late 2021, Gage was released directly to a hospital because of concerning behaviors he exhibited behind bars. When he reported to the probation office after a five-day hospital stay, his probation officer reported "concerning mental health-related behaviors."

"Mr. Walter verbally expressed his unwillingness to seek further medical care to assist in management of his mental health," the probation officer wrote in a report dated Dec. 3, 2021.

Gage was released from jail after serving a month on the meth possession conviction about three weeks prior to the killings. When he got out, the Walter family said, they wanted to help him succeed. Scott let Gage move into a rental home he owned in Council Bluffs, and lined up a job. They bought him furniture and groceries. They brought him to the family plumbing business and hugged him. *We want to be proud of you this time.*



Kasie Earnest, Jim Walter's granddaughter, holds her phone with a photo of Linda Walter and Kasie's son, Cooper Robinson, in Jim Walter's house in Omaha, on Tuesday, Nov. 12, 2024. The photo was taken in 2019.

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"Everything seemed good," Scott said. "He seemed motivated."

A week later, Scott said he went to the home and found it trashed with broken windows. They went searching for Gage at local homeless shelters and tent encampments with no luck. The next — and last — time they saw Gage, he was in an orange jumpsuit at the Douglas County Correctional Center after his arrest for the killings.

The System: With few options, people with severe mental illnesses often end up in jails or homeless

One question haunts everyone involved: What, if anything, could have prevented this from happening?

Gage was repeatedly hospitalized. He, at times, received long-acting injectable antipsychotic medications. He was in and out of jail almost constantly for years. Petitions to commit Gage for involuntary inpatient psychiatric treatment were filed three times with the Douglas County Board of Mental Health in 2018 and 2020, according to his attorney (those records are sealed, and it's unclear if any petitions resulted in an involuntary commitment). When family members tried to admit Gage to the hospital or a residential drug treatment program on two occasions, they said, he was turned away.

Neither Gage nor his family members know of an intervention or a program that could have prevented the killings. Gage still views the voices as an outside force that acts upon him, not as a symptom of mental illness. Maybe, Gage said, if someone had spent "every waking moment" with him, it could have been prevented. Even then, he isn't sure.

Family members don't know what would have helped overcome Gage's unwillingness to seek treatment and his persistent drug use. It would have required an internal shift — a willingness to get better — that they never saw him display.

In the aftermath of deinstitutionalization, which saw a drastic decrease in the number of people treated for psychiatric illness in state institutions across the U.S., community-based mental health services became the preferred treatment option of both mental health advocates and the federal government.

Some critics say the well-intentioned shift away from “warehousing” the mentally ill in highly-restrictive psychiatric wards had the unintended consequence of increasing the number of people who are homeless or incarcerated while dealing with severe, debilitating mental illness. And as Nebraska struggles to expand access to community-based services, the rates at which people utilize those services remains low.

According to a **2023 report** from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, or SAMHSA, Nebraska's utilization rate for community-based mental health services is far below the national average. About 9 of every 1,000 Nebraskans utilized community-based mental health services. The national rate is nearly 24 per 1,000.

That number is even smaller for people with serious mental illness: Nebraska's rate is 5 out of 1,000, while the national rate is 17.4 per 1,000.

An **investigation conducted by the U.S. Department of Justice** this year concluded that Nebraska "severely limits access to community-based services" in favor of segregated settings like assisted living facilities and day programs. The community-based services that do exist are "underdeveloped" and are often used as a precursor to sending patients to an assisted living facility, the report said.

"Almost any need for community-based services triggers referral to an assisted living facility — from challenges taking medications at home to discharging from the Lincoln Regional Center after years of hospitalization," the report found. The report ended with the threat of a lawsuit for violations of the Americans with Disabilities Act if the state does not work to remedy the violations.

There are bright spots in Nebraska's mental health landscape: The **newly-opened Community Alliance Center for Mental Health** offers psychiatric, counseling, housing, employment and primary health care services under one roof. A new 38-bed inpatient psychiatric facility at Children's Nebraska will increase access for juveniles **when it opens in early 2026**. In September, a **behavioral health urgent care clinic** for children and adolescents opened in Kearney. **Construction began** in August for a 96-bed behavioral health hospital in Council Bluffs.

But most of those are for voluntary treatment. Those who are treatment-resistant, like Gage, often end up in an endless cycle of incarceration and homelessness.

Officials routinely refer to the Douglas County Correctional Center as the largest mental health institution in the state. Corrections director Mike Myers said 25% to 30% of the jail's population, which fluctuates between 900 and 1,000 people, have a serious mental illness in an average month.

Data collected from the **Douglas County Correctional Center** and the **Sarpy County Jail** by Region 6 behavioral health, which administers mental health services in Douglas, Sarpy and surrounding counties, shows that people with serious mental illnesses make up a disproportionate number of jail inmates. They also stay in jail longer and have a much higher likelihood of being back behind bars within 12 months of their arrest.

That pattern of lengthy, recurring stays could offer an opportunity to connect people with serious mental illness to services while they are behind bars. Cindy Boganowski, who leads a team of reentry specialists at the Douglas County Correctional Center, said they prioritize a "warm handoff" with services on the outside.

"We know that just giving people a packet of phone numbers doesn't really help them," Boganowski said. "We focus on having a warm handoff before they are released. Whether that's to a treatment facility, a peer support person, or a general assistance appointment. We do a lot of those screenings and phone calls and contacts before they leave here, so they actually have talked to somebody."

But the barriers to treatment, particularly for people with persistent, severe mental illness, are still significant. Justine Wall, who works in reentry at the jail, said there aren't many facilities in the area to provide the intensive supervision that some people need. And there is little reentry specialists can do when an inmate does not want to access treatment or services.

"There's plenty of people you can focus on who actually want treatment," Wall said. "And the more treatment-resistant people are the ones who are coming back over and over again. So we work on developing a relationship when they come in, and trying to set things up again, hoping eventually it'll catch."

Boganowski, Wall and Myers all said the most crucial thing missing in the community is access to residential treatment centers for those with a serious mental illness without a hard time-limit on how long a person can stay. From 2022 to 2023, **according to the SAMHSA survey**, only 88 people across the entire state were served in residential treatment centers.

"Some folks are going to need that kind of supported, assisted environment on an ongoing basis," Myers said. "We have to realize that for some people, that's the best that we can hope for."

The End: An unsent letter and an empty home

For the surviving members of the Walter family, the insanity finding felt like a life sentence.

A lifetime of annual review hearings at which they will beg for Gage to stay locked away.

A lifetime without the sense of closure, however faint, that a guilty verdict and a lengthy prison sentence may have brought.

"If anyone lets this man out and he kills again, which he will, they will have blood on their hands," Shelby said.

Though they acknowledge his mental health history, some members of the family are not convinced by the finding of criminal insanity. They think, at the least, the case should have been heard by a jury; they object to the idea that court-appointed psychologists have what often amounts to the final say in determining a defendant's sanity.

As they see it, regardless of Gage's state of mind when he entered the home with a hammer, a system that allows Gage an annual chance at release is ill-equipped to handle such violent crimes.

"He shouldn't get another chance," Scott said.

Gage hasn't spoken to Jim, Scott or Shelby since the killings. Sometimes he wishes he could call Jim to apologize. But he "wouldn't dare" make Jim hear his voice.

A letter that Jim Walter wrote to his grandson, Gage Walter, sits on the coffee table in his home. The letter was written a few months after Gage Walter killed Jim Walter's wife, Linda Walter, and his mother-in-law, Marceline Teeters. A line in the letter reads, "My heart aches 24 hrs a day."

Jim tried, once, to send Gage a letter. It never made it to the Lincoln Regional Center, but he kept a copy of the handwritten note scrawled on unlined paper. He wrote it at 3:26 a.m. on Thanksgiving morning in 2022. It was Linda's favorite day of the year; she would wake him up at dawn to start preparing food. On that day, for the first time in 50 years, Jim woke up on the holiday morning in an empty home.

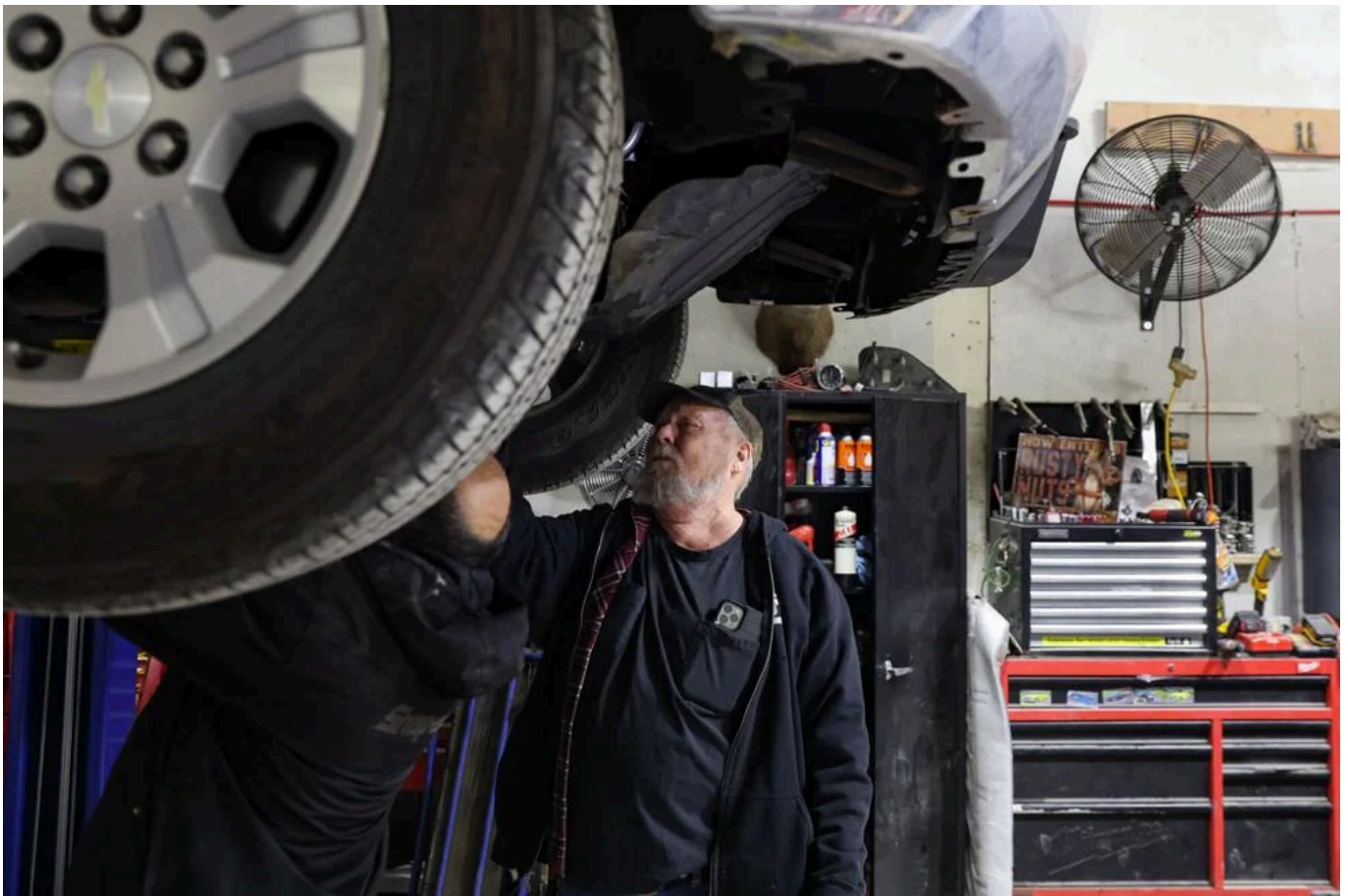
Understanding the insanity plea: How criminal insanity works in Nebraska's justice system

Photos: Life without Linda: Omaha man's wife and mother-in-law killed by grandson



Jim Walter walks into the car garage in his family's plumbing business in Ralston, on Friday, Nov. 15, 2024. Jim spends time working on cars to keep him busy and connected to his family.

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Jim Walters, right, inspects the underside of a truck with David Nicklaus, left, in the car garage in his family's plumbing shop in Ralston, on Tuesday, Nov. 26, 2024.

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Members of the Walter family laugh and smile after telling a story about the late Linda Walter in Jim Walter's, right, home in Omaha, on Thursday, Nov. 7, 2024.

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Jim Walter points to a magnet on his fridge in his house in Omaha, on Tuesday, Nov. 26, 2024. Jim keeps family photos, recipes from his late wife, Linda, and drawings from his children and grandchildren when they were younger.

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Shelby Walter, Jim Walter's granddaughter, holds up a framed photo of Jim and Linda Walter's 51st wedding anniversary in Jim's home in Omaha, on Thursday, Nov. 7, 2024. The photo was taken in December of 2021.

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Jim Walter stands for a portrait in the doorway of his Omaha house, on Tuesday, Nov. 26, 2024.

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Jim Walter looks around his kitchen in Omaha, on Tuesday, Nov. 26, 2024. His late wife, Linda Walter, would spend hours cooking and was known in her family to be an exceptional cook.

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Jim Walter sits on a recliner as he watches the Dallas Cowboys take on the New York Giants on Thanksgiving in his home in Omaha, on Thursday, Nov. 28, 2024. Although he wanted to spend Thanksgiving alone, his daughter called him and convinced him to come over for dinner.

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Shelby Walter, Jim Walter's granddaughter, points to a frame with family photos in Jim's house in Omaha, on Thursday, Nov. 7, 2024. The picture frame has a quote that reads, "Life takes us to unexpected places. Love brings us home."

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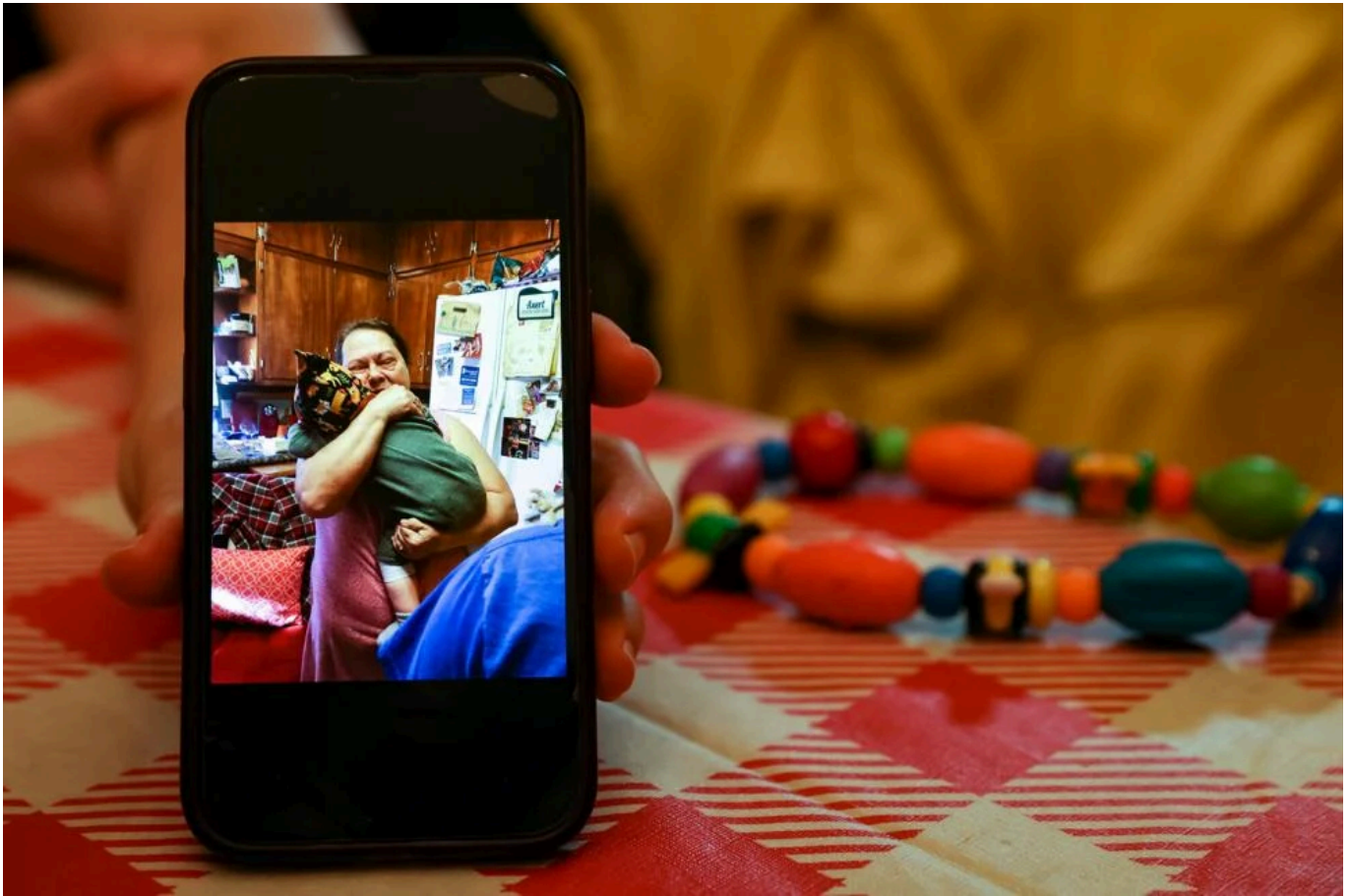
Amy Walter, center, Jim Walter's daughter-in-law, holds her granddaughter, 2-month-old Emi Ramos, while her daughter, Shelby Walter, left, fixes a picture frame in Jim's house in Omaha, on Thursday, Nov. 7, 2024.

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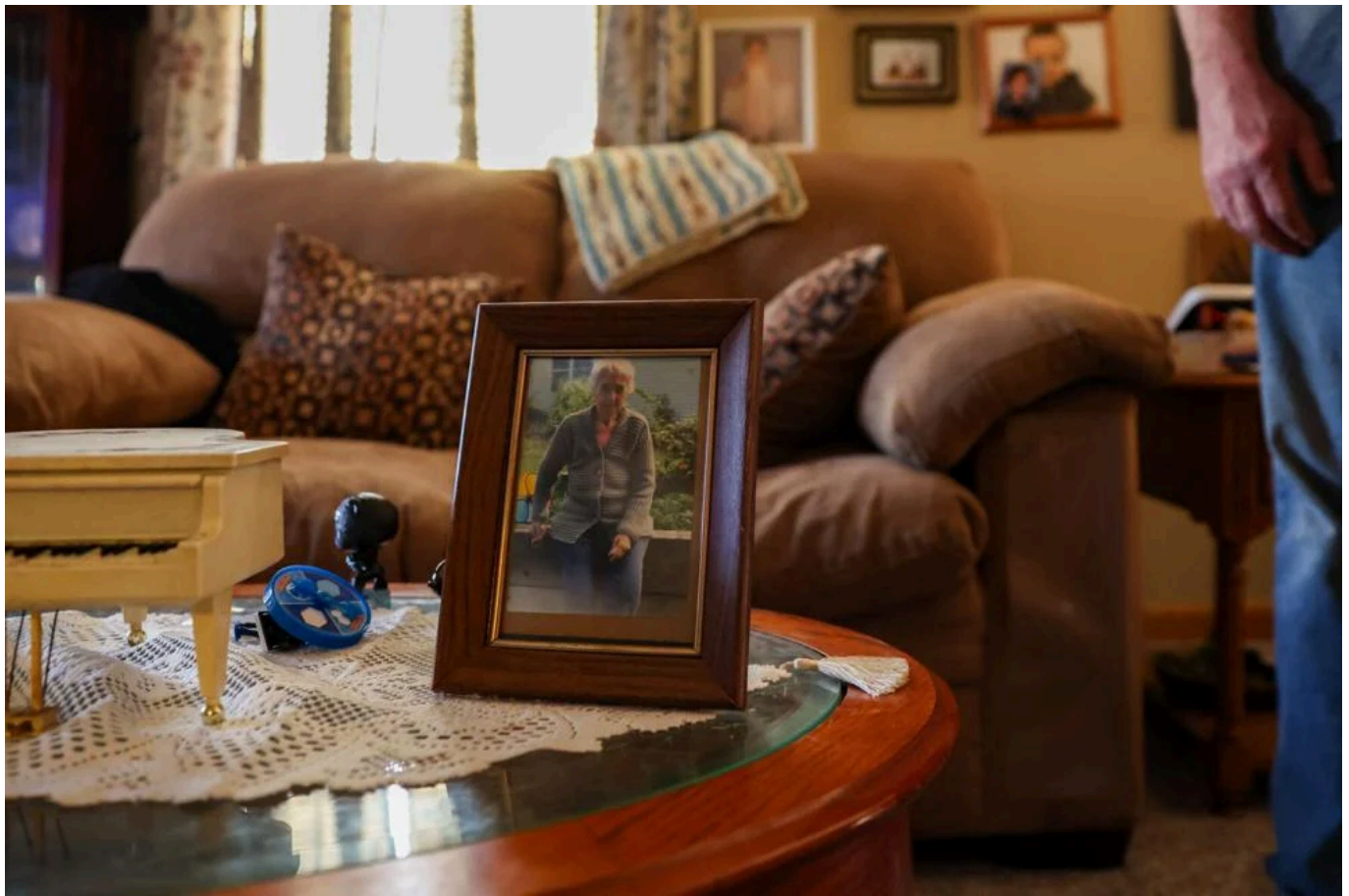
Shelby Walter, Jim Walter's granddaughter, fixes a picture frame with a T-shirt and photos of her late grandmother, Linda Walter, in Jim's house in Omaha, on Thursday, Nov. 7, 2024.

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Kasie Earnest, Jim Walter's granddaughter, holds her phone with a photo of Linda Walter and Kasie's son, Cooper Robinson, in Jim Walter's house in Omaha, on Tuesday, Nov. 12, 2024. The photo was taken in 2019.

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A framed photo of Marceline Teeters, Jim Walter's mother-in-law, is displayed on the coffee table in the living room of Jim Walter's house in Omaha, on Thursday, Nov. 7, 2024.

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Amy Walter, Jim Walter's daughter-in-law, center, helps her grandson Kylo Ramos, 5, center, and grand-nephews, Charles Robinson, left, 6, and Cooper Robinson, 5, right, hold a decorative "W" plastered with family photos in front of Jim's house in Omaha, on Thursday, Nov. 7, 2024.

LIZ RYMAREV, THE WORLD-HERALD



Jim Walter stands for a portrait in front of his house in Omaha, on Thursday, Nov. 7, 2024. He wears a T-shirt with a photo of him and his late wife, Linda Walter, kissing.

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A photo of Gage Walter, right, and his siblings, Seth Walter, left, and Haley Walter, center, is displayed in Jim Walter's house in Omaha, on Tuesday, Nov. 26, 2024. The photo was taken at Christmas in 2009.

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Why? ... you do this?
Without love you are right to do it
You was mad on the wire Sunday hang a mine
and success of your relationship You
Saturday August 13, 2022 in the
You Took my side You Took my World
You was angry then that you Destroyed a Great
Chris, Seth, Thane Gremna Trson Lacie Lila Char
Shelly, Kellen with you Took her Away
You Took her away from
Gremna, Charlier, Kihoy
You Took my Hero Away
My heart aches 24 hrs a day
I cry at every thought of her
I go to visit her now at St John's Cemetery
Now I see her picture and all I can think
What You did To her
I have One Thing to be Thankful on This
And That is
I have a Strong loving family and we will
Now

A letter that Jim Walter wrote to his grandson, Gage Walter, lays on the coffee table in his home in Omaha, on Thursday, Nov. 7, 2024. The letter was written a few months after Gage Walter killed Jim Walter's wife, Linda Walter, and his mother-in-law, Marceline Teeters. A line in the letter reads, "My heart aches 24 hrs a day." Jim has yet been able to deliver the letter to Gage.

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Jim Walter reacts as granddaughter Shelby Walter reads a letter in Jim's house in Omaha on Nov. 7. Jim wrote the letter and addressed it to his grandson, Gage Walter, who killed Jim Walter's wife, Linda Walter, and his mother-in-law, Marceline Teeters. Jim has not yet been able to deliver the letter to Gage.

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Briana Lohrenz, Jim Walter's granddaughter, right, holds the hand of her aunt, Jamie Kirschbaum, as she wipes a tear from her eye in Jim's house in Omaha, on Thursday, Nov. 7, 2024. Jaime discovered her mother and grandmother, Linda Walter and Marceline Teeters, dead on Saturday, Aug. 13, 2022.

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Amy Walter, left, looks down at her father-in-law, Jim Walter, as he smiles while listening to a story about his late wife, Linda Walter, in his house in Omaha, on Thursday, Nov. 7, 2024.

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*Correction: A new 38-bed inpatient psychiatric facility at Children's Nebraska will increase access for juveniles **when it opens in early 2026**. The name of the hospital was incorrect in an earlier version of this report.*

By Molly Ashford

Public safety reporter
