

Resources

By Patti Atkins

The Area Agency on Aging & Disabilities of Southwest Washington's Caregiver Corner

Long-term care program seeks SW Washington volunteers

The Washington State Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program is looking for volunteers in Southwest Washington.

The ombudsman program is an independent organization that advocates for the rights of residents living in long-term care homes. It relies heavily on trained volunteers who visit, resolve complaints and advocate for residents of long-term care facilities.

Ombuds is a Swedish word meaning "to advocate for another."

Nearly 80,000 Washingtonians live in more than 4,300 licensed long-term care facilities across the state. Most are in community-based settings like adult family and assisted living homes, while others are in nursing homes and other enhanced services facilities.

Over the past five years, long-term care residents experienced a twin pandemic of COVID infection and prolonged isolation. Even without a global pandemic, many long-term care residents do not receive regular visits from family or friends, or don't know where to turn for help solving the challenges they face. They may even experience neglect and abuse.

Ombuds serve as a voice for people who may not feel they have one, or fear that if they complain they may be subject to retribution. They assess how residents are doing, flag incidents of poor quality of care and violations of residents' rights, and help residents resolve complaints.

In a typical year, trained volunteers donate more than 45,000 hours visiting residents, addressing complaints, including reports of abuse, neglect and substandard care. They are the eyes and ears, assessing how residents are doing. Ombuds resolve over 90% of the complaints received and reduce the need for costly government or legal interventions.

"We simply could not do what we do without volunteers," said Patricia Hunter, Washington state long-term care ombuds.

Common violations of resident rights and complaints that ombuds address include:

- Involuntary discharge/eviction
- Lack of personal dignity and respect
- Slow or no response to request for assistance
- Issues with medications
- Issues related to hygiene
- Civil rights and billing issues

Connie (last name withheld at her request) volunteers with the Area Agency on Aging & Disabilities in Southwest Washington. She says she counted on the unwavering support her family provided during extensive hospitalizations and rehabilitation following numerous surgeries. Upon learning that vulnerable adults were denied access to loved ones during the pandemic, she became outraged. That spurred her to become a volunteer ombuds in October 2020.

Connie usually visits her assigned facilities once a week. She currently visits two assisted living communities that with about 100 residents and one memory care facility with 20 residents.

"I've helped resolve complaints about medication mix-ups, unlawful discharge, food service issues, facility maintenance and resident conflicts," she said. "I recently assisted a petite 85-year-old woman who had moved into an assisted living facility. She had repeatedly requested maintenance lower a closet rod and shelf, but her requests went unheeded. This resulted in her clothes being piled on her bed, rendering it unusable, and a stack of items on her floor creating a tripping hazard.

After visiting the woman, Connie emailed the executive director of the facility, outlining safety concerns and the resident's difficult sleeping arrangements. She emphasized the resident's rights and the facility's obligation to provide a safe environment, and the situation was resolved within 24 hours. Regrettably, the resident had to endure four weeks of sleeping in a

chair and navigating a hazardous environment.

"It's very satisfying to know you're helping people make their living situation better, opening lines of communication and helping residents understand they still have their rights," Connie said. "We speak up for residents who too often don't feel like their voice is being heard. Sometimes all it takes to be helpful is being a good listener, other times, we need to be creative problem-solvers and mediators."

Connie firmly believes that everyone deserves an advocate, and she finds immense satisfaction in assisting historically underserved residents.

Benefits of volunteering

Research shows that volunteering has multiple health benefits, especially in older adults, including the following.

- Keeps you moving and thinking, providing physical and mental health benefits.
- Reduces stress, anxiety and depression.
- Provides a sense of purpose, increasing life satisfaction and self-esteem.
- Builds social connections and support systems as you meet new people with shared interests.



Long-term care ombuds are trained in infection control, issues in aging, mental health, dementia and disability. The certification training — provided at no cost — covers regulations, complaint investigation, interview protocols, cultural competency, advocacy, ombudsman ethics and the rights of residents. Volunteers and staff meet monthly for continued training and support. Travel mileage is reimbursed.

For more information on volunteering with the ombudsman program in Southwest Washington, visit helpingelders.org/long-term-care-support or call Neil Degerstedt at 360-992-4076.

Patti Atkins, APR, is the communications coordinator for the Area Agency on Aging & Disabilities of Southwest Washington.

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