

Senior Times

Your Guide to Active Retirement in North Central Florida

A Voice and Advocate for Individuals in Care Facilities

Florida's Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program supports those who need it most

By Patricia C. Behnke

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Anyone who has a loved one in a long-term care facility knows that quality care and attention are the cornerstones to peace of mind for both the resident and the family. Through Florida's Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program, support and guidance are only a phone call away.

Throughout the state, 17 local councils provide services for the thousands of residents who live in nursing homes, assisted living facilities and adult family care homes. Those seeking a long-term placement for a loved one can also receive advice and information on potential facilities.

"We are both proactive and reactive in our approach," said Lily Wilde, district ombudsman manager for the North Central Florida office. "We can help in the selection process, and we react to complaints."

The program makes available a list of complaints against facilities and advises potential residents on what to look for in those facilities, Wilde said. They also address the needs of the resident and help formulate questions to ask when seeking a long-term residence.

"We can advise them when to visit a facility, for example," Wilde said. "We provide family and residents with a list of supportive services and area resources."

Florida's Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program began in 1975 after the passage of the Older Americans Act, which set forth residents' rights for individuals in long-term care facilities. The program acts as an advocate for these individuals using a corps of 400 volunteers whose purpose is to resolve problems to the residents' satisfaction.

"Our volunteers come from all areas," Wilde said. "Some are retired, some work. We have doctors, nurses, teachers, pharmacists, social workers working with residents in 3,800 facilities throughout the state."

In addition to six hours of field training, volunteers receive 20 hours of training and instruction on residents' rights, the ombudsman program in general, facility inspections, and complaint investigation and resolution.

According to the program's brochure, "Complaints may be made about persons or institutions that are in a position to threaten or interfere with the rights, health, safety and/or welfare of long-term care residents."

Wilde said, "When we first make contact with a resident or family member, we determine if the complaint falls under one of the federal violations. If it does, we then assign an ombudsman to begin an investigation."

Residents of long-term care facilities retain all the rights of U.S. citizens under the Constitution and gain a special set of rights under state and federal laws. Those rights must be posted in all facilities.

Sometimes the investigation involves visiting the facility on the midnight shift or on the weekend or visiting when an administrator is not present. Complaints range from issues regarding medication administration to billing problems to matters involving the dignity and respect of residents. Ombudsmen try to visit each facility in the state on a quarterly basis.

"We make sure residents know we are here for them," Wilde said. "We are an outlet for their concerns." §

To Volunteer with Florida's Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program

Call 1-888-831-0404 or visit <http://ombudsman.myflorida.com> for an application.

If you believe your rights have been violated

Call 1-888-831-0404 and your call will be routed to the local district office or visit <http://ombudsman.myflorida.com>. All calls remain confidential.

Who can use the Ombudsman Program?

- Residents of long-term care facilities
- Relatives and friends of residents
- Concerned facility administrators and employees
- Any person or group concerned about the rights and treatment of residents' care and quality of life