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Advocates Suggest Elder Care Changes

By KAREN BRANCH-BRIOSO The Tampa Tribune

TAMPA - The people who try to improve lives of older Floridians in long-term care launched a statewide series of town hall meetings Thursday on how to do that job better.

They got advice from insiders like Evelyn Holmes. She landed in Heritage Park, a Dade City nursing home, after a massive heart attack landed her in a wheelchair three years ago.

"I just wanted to let the ombudsman and the state to know we're being treated like babies instead of aged people," said Holmes, 56. "I love gospel singing and they say I'm disturbing the patients. I ask them, 'Why, if I'm disturbing, do the patients call me to come over and sing?'"

But mostly, the chiefs of the Department of Elder Affairs and the Florida Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program and lawmakers, including state Sen. Ronda Storms, heard from the advocates who work every day to protect seniors. Of the almost 100 people gathered at a Sheraton Suites ballroom, most were advocates or volunteers for the ombudsman program itself.

Some said the state needs stronger prosecution of adult abuse crimes.

Austin Curry, the Tampa-based executive director of Elder Care Advocacy of Florida in Tampa, decried that charges were dropped recently against a Palmetto assisted-living facility owner after a resident's cancerous lesion went untreated during his stay there.

"She was allowed to go free," Curry said, also citing the case of the operator of a West Tampa boarding home, where 19 people were living in cramped and stifling conditions until police swept in. "We have the West Tampa House of Horrors, while the owner was living in a palatial estate &hellip She, in all probability, will walk free, too."

They demanded better wages and training for the certified nursing assistants who do the nitty-grittiest of care in long-term care homes. They asked for more money from the state to provide services for elders at home, so they can avoid nursing homes that get more of the state dollars.

Elder Affairs Secretary Doug Beach said there had been some headway in that area.

"In the special session, legislators appropriated 1,000 new [Medicaid] diversion slots," Beach said. "So the Legislature and the governor are hearing the cries to put more money into diversion."

Tom Poss of Lady Lake, whose wife is one of hundreds of volunteers who are the backbone of the long-term care ombudsman program, said advocates need to be able to photograph the evidence of abuse. He said it would put more punch in the inspections by the Agency for Health Care Administration that licenses long-term facilities,

"Now, you report a case to AHCA and AHCA may take five to 10 days to come out," Poss said. "By then, everything's fine. AHCA goes in and says, 'Where's the evidence?' When you get [the complaints], close the suckers down."

One other insider reminded the elder care advocates that it's not just elders living in the facilities. David Torres is 35 and in a wheelchair. He said at Glen Oaks, the Clearwater nursing home where he lives, he is surrounded by residents his grandparents' age.

"They need more facilities for people under 40," Torres said. "People my age, we're wondering why we're still there."

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