

Palm Beach Post

Volunteer advocates make a difference for seniors

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WEST PALM BEACH — The nursing home resident complained to Ilana Green that he wasn't getting any mail. Surely, he whispered, the staff is hiding my letters. Green, an ombudsman who volunteers to represent senior citizens in long-term care clinics, listened attentively. She sent the man letters from her house, asking him to call her when they arrived. When the man called, she explained to him his mail was getting through.



Bill Ingram/The Post

Department of Elder Affairs Secretary E. Douglas Beach and Clare Caldwell-Horton, ombudsman manager for the department's southwest Florida district, listen as residents voice their concerns during a town hall meeting sponsored by the Florida Long-Term Care Ombudsman program in West Palm Beach on Friday.

"I'm not a cop. I try to be tactful and diplomatic. My overall role is to make the residents' lives as pleasant as possible," said Green, who has volunteered in several nursing homes in West Palm Beach.

The Boynton Beach resident is one of about two dozen Palm Beach County volunteers who help seniors living in the 170 nursing homes, adult-family care homes and assisted-living facilities in Palm Beach County. The volunteers - almost all are retired - are especially needed to help residents who have no family, said Brian Lee, spokesman for the Florida Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program.

Nursing home representatives defended their industry at a conference Friday at the West Palm Beach Marriott sponsored by the Florida Department of Elder Affairs. Their industry is strictly regulated by state and local agencies, said Ed Bursztyn, executive director of the 180-patient Regents Park Nursing and Rehabilitation Center in Boca Raton. Some patient problems are out of their control, such as doctors who over-prescribe medicine, Bursztyn said.

"Like all industries, we have problems. But most of our staff is very dedicated to our patients. Only the bad stuff gets publicity," said Bursztyn, who has been with Regents 25 years. "There is a lack of communication between patients and staff. The ombudsmen give us the grassroots communication we need."

Ombudsmen are given training that includes several days of classroom and field work where volunteers learn how to protect the rights of seniors. Volunteers then spend about 20 hours a month meeting with senior citizens, inspecting local facilities and responding to individual complaints. Volunteers who have medical, legal and financial training are especially needed. But anyone, as long as they are at least 18 years old, is welcome. Volunteers are reimbursed for gas and meals, Lee said. Ombudsmen supplement the duties of state and local inspectors, and do not take over or replace them at their jobs.

"We could not do our job without the 400 Florida volunteers. They make a big impact on the care and life of the residents," Lee said.

Sister Audrey Hull, who has been an ombudsman for about nine years, said the volunteers have earned the respect of the administrators in the medical facilities. While the ombudsmen advocate for their patients, they also must be aware that many patients' and their families' expectations of care can't be met, she said.

"Sometimes, the complaints are unfounded," said Hull, a resident of the convent at Rosarian Academy in West Palm Beach. "I've learned that the vast majority of people working in nursing homes are doing the best they can and are very caring. We have the ear of the administrators. Our goal is to settle the problem without having to forward the issue to a state agency."

If the ombudsman can't settle the issue, state officials from the Agency for Healthcare Administration, Attorney General or another agency are informed and take over the case, said Allen Jaggard, Palm Beach County district ombudsman manager.

"It's not that often we can't solve the problem ourselves. The ombudsman will write up his findings and meet with the administrator. We can usually work out a resolution," Jaggard said. When the volunteers make one of their annual, unannounced visits to a nursing home or assisted-living facility, they talk to residents about medical care, food services and all other aspects of care. They check on exercise programs and cleanliness standards. They also check for any evidence of physical abuse. They report their findings to ombudsman officials, Lee said. Ombudsman also respond to complaints from patients, family or anyone else. Some residents complain they are not getting bathed enough. Or the physical therapy is insufficient. Some say the food is bad.

Complaints can be signed or sent anonymously. Some residents send anonymous complaints because they fear retribution, Jaggard said.

"You have to have a lot of compassion to be a volunteer. You are dealing with some not-very-nice situations. Some of the residents have dementia. Many of the workers are overworked and low-paid. Many do not speak English," Jaggard said. "It's tough. But it's very rewarding to help people who are at a point where they can at least help themselves."

Most complaints come from residents and family members, said Jim Wilbers, a retired hospital administrator from the Midwest who has been a volunteer for about two years. Once a complaint is received, the case is assigned to an ombudsman for investigation. The first step is to talk with the complainant, other residents and facility administrators, he said.

"I go into every complaint with an unbiased attitude. We have a checklist of things we inspect, everything from food to bathrooms. We talk to other residents away from the administrators to determine if the complaints are real," said Wilbers, a Jupiter resident.

And there is an added benefit to being an ombudsman, the volunteers said. Many make new friends, said Green, who sent the letters to the nursing home resident.

"That gentleman I sent the letters to, he called me when he got my first letter. He's a very nice man," said Green. "I will send him a Christmas card."

The Florida Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program

- *About two dozen more volunteers are needed in Palm Beach County.*
- *Volunteers who speak Spanish and Creole are especially needed.*
- *Volunteers are asked to work about 20 hours a month.*
- *Nursing home residents or their families can file complaints by phone, e-mail or regular mail. Complaints are responded to within five working days and are confidential.*
- *For information, call (561) 837-5038. Or go to www.elderaffairs.state.fl.us/ and click on Ombudsman in the navigation bar on the right. Or mail to Ombudsman Program, 4040 Esplanade Way, Tallahassee, FL 32399-7000.*