

FLORIDA'S LONG-TERM CARE OMBUDSMAN PROGRAM

Advocating for Long-Term Care Residents

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CONTACT:
Franko Galoso
galosof@elderaffairs.org

A View from Inside the Ombudsman Program

By James M. (Jim) Croteau

Less than two full weeks on the job and I am pleasantly surprised and impressed. Asked by Department of Elder Affairs Secretary Charles Corley to serve as Interim State Ombudsman for the Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program, I had read all the outside claims of turmoil and the negative press: lawsuits, investigations, resignations, and retirements. I expected chaos when I arrived in the office, but I found just the opposite.

I discovered dedicated staff at the program's central office who were hard at work supporting ombudsman volunteers in responding to residents' needs, in addition to capturing data, preparing required reports, and presenting policy and legislative recommendations. Regional and district managers were handling over 5,000 complaints expeditiously and professionally. The program is on target to complete by September 30, a resident-centered assessment of over 4,000 nursing homes, assisted living facilities, and adult family care homes that complements those of the Agency for Health Care Administration and other regulatory agencies.

What is not generally reported in the media is the tremendous work of 370 trained volunteer ombudsmen across the state. These dedicated individuals visit every long-term care facility to ensure that each resident and their family members are aware of their rights and have access to the Ombudsman Program to voice their concerns or complaints. The ombudsmen work with residents, families, and facility administrators and staff to resolve issues and to keep the lines of communications open to prevent future issues or complaints.

A second role the ombudsmen have is to look out for the safety, health and welfare of all long-term care residents. During their assessments and visits, whether or not they are responding to a complaint, the ombudsmen look at the physical environment, nutrition program, medicine management, personal care, and staff-resident interaction among other quality measures. If issues are identified and administrator responses are inadequate, appropriate referrals, are made to regulatory or licensing agencies.

The most important part of the Ombudsman Program is the advocacy role that the volunteers and program staff are charged with. No matter what the critics say, the truth is that each day the Ombudsman Program champions the rights of long-term care residents. The move into the Statewide Medicaid Managed Care Long-Term Care Program in Florida; the increasing number of Medicaid-eligible seniors; and one of the fastest growing senior populations in the country will only increase the need for, and the importance of, a strong voice for those who cannot speak for themselves.

The Florida Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program is always on the lookout for dedicated volunteers. Additionally, it is important that our volunteers have the support of the public who know that our most vulnerable seniors need caring people to help protect their safety and quality of life. If everyone had the inside perspective that I now have, they would certainly be impressed by the ongoing work of the program's staff and volunteer ombudsmen. I appreciate this opportunity to support the program's critically important mission and I am proud to be a part of this team.

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James M. (Jim) Croteau is the Interim Long-Term Care Ombudsman for Florida and can be reached at croteauj@elderaffairs.org.