

# Media Release

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## Florida Long-Term Care Program Refutes Accusation of Being “Muzzled”

*~The Florida Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program is speaking out about their #1 priority.~*

**Tallahassee, Florida** – State Ombudsman Michael Milliken refutes any implications insinuating the program is ineffective or “muzzled.” The Florida Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program’s (LTCOP) mission is to improve the quality of life and care for all Florida long-term care residents by advocating for and protecting their health, safety, welfare, and rights.

“Our Ombudsman volunteers are very dedicated. The thousands of hours they spend advocating for long-term care residents is no small endeavor,” said Milliken. “Assisting residents through difficult situations can be both rewarding and heartbreaking. These special volunteers deserve our respect for their commitment, and should not be regarded as ineffective. Their efforts are based solely on the interest of the residents they serve. We will continue to work with long-term care facilities to resolve the issues facing residents.”

Repeated accusations stating the change in State Ombudsman leadership over the years has led to a “chilling effect” on the Ombudsman program could not be further from the truth. The Ombudsman program has evolved over time. Processes that were deemed ineffective were discarded, and new processes have been created with the input from staff and volunteers. There are more ombudsman volunteers today than in 2010. While the name of the person in the State Ombudsman’s chair may have changed, the focus resident’s rights has not.

In reporting year 2017, volunteer ombudsmen conducted over 8,800 visitations and assessments and investigated more than 5,390 complaints. Within the same timeframe, ombudsmen volunteers were available, in person, to more than 400,000 long-term care residents, which is up from previous years. “The more direct contact with residents may have resulted in fewer complaints being filed,” Milliken said. “Some concerns were resolved on the spot, and did not require the need for a formal investigation by Ombudsmen or other agencies.”

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“While the Ombudsman program works with the Department of Elder Affairs (DOEA), as well as other agencies, we function completely independently of those agencies,” said Milliken. “As State Ombudsman, I am able to perform my duties without interference from any special interest groups or agencies.”

The role of the LTCOP is to be the voice of residents in long-term care and advocate for their rights. The Ombudsman program is not a regulatory or enforcement agency. If the LTCOP is unable to resolve an issue to the resident’s satisfaction, the complaint will be referred to the appropriate agency, which may include the Agency for Healthcare Administration (AHCA), the Department of Elder Affairs (DOEA), Department of Children and Families (DCF), law enforcement, to name a few.

Milliken says, “In the future, I hope our referral numbers drop to zero. Although I understand a referral may be necessary regardless of our efforts. Zero referrals mean our volunteers would have been able to resolve all resident complaints to their satisfaction.”

“Our number one priority is residents of long-term care facilities,” said Milliken. “In this endeavor, passion and emotion are drivers in helping to get things done. We plan to focus that passion in the right place, and not on people and programs seeking to negate the accomplishments of our volunteers and the residents they work so hard to serve.”

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*The Department of Elder Affairs fully supports the Office of the State Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program’s authority to independently advocate for the health, safety, rights and welfare of long-term care facility residents. Consequently, the views and opinions expressed by the Office may not necessarily represent the official policy or position of the Department of Elder Affairs or its employees.*