

State of Wisconsin Board on Aging and Long Term Care

2019 Louise Abrahams Yaffe Volunteer Ombudsman Program Award

Debra A. Ross- Volunteer Ombudsman

Debra is a true Wisconsin native who was born and raised in Milwaukee where she currently lives, works, and volunteers!

Debra came to the Volunteer Ombudsman Program after reading an article about the need for volunteer advocates in local nursing homes. Debra, in addition to working for 38 years as a full-time administrative assistant to the Senior Vice President of International Banking for the US Bank in Milwaukee, decided she could make time to attend training to become a Volunteer Ombudsman. Debra indicated she is and has been a volunteer in some capacity most of her life as it is in her nature to give back.

Debra has been a Volunteer Ombudsman for the Board on Aging and Long Term Care Volunteer Ombudsman Program for the past twelve years and counting. She has been a constant, diligent, and strong voice, on a weekly basis, for residents living in three different skilled nursing homes in Milwaukee. Debra, upon request from the Board on Aging, added the responsibility of making supplementary weekly visits to support the advocacy efforts of the Ombudsman Program during a recent nursing home closure. Debra's visits helped residents feel supported and safe during the process of the closure which affected the quality of life for a substantial number of older people in Milwaukee.

Building trusting relationships with residents is Debra's mission – being their voice is her passion. Debra meets with residents who need attention, but may be afraid to speak up on their own and are often simply grateful for any kind of care they receive. Debra says it's the "little things" she has brought to the attention of nursing home staff that help make the residents' lives a little nicer such as posting menus for residents at eye-level, including and providing the alternate menu choices upon request, meal satisfaction, fresh water, privacy, timely and polite call light response, clean linens, clean clothes, and clean living spaces are just a few.

Debra works closely with her Volunteer Coordinator and her Regional Ombudsman, and routinely provides them with residents' concerns, the outcomes of concerns addressed and updates on facility staff changes, as well as, the facility name changes. Her current facility has had three different names in two years.

Debra provides observed and reported concerns to the Volunteer Coordinator and Regional Ombudsman that often surpass the "little things." On one of Debra's weekly nursing home visits she heard a wander-guard door alarm activated. Noticing some staff's apparent disregard of the alarm, she reported the alarm activation and observed lack of staff concern to the administrator and the Board on Aging. The facility staff ultimately took notice and located a missing resident on the roof-top of the building. During another visit Debra reported a resident stating they felt harassed and fearful of involuntary discharge from the facility and wanted her help. With the resident's permission Debra reported the resident's concern and fear to the Regional Ombudsman. The resident received advocacy services from the Regional Ombudsman and remains in same location safe and happy.

Debra consistently makes visits to check on residents' well-being on a specialized unit at her assigned nursing home. She has established a trusting relationship and has made an impact on the lives of a particular eighty year old mother and her sixty year old daughter as evidenced by this message given to the Board on Aging regarding Debra. The message read: "A volunteer named Deb comes to visit with

me and my daughter, she is warm, comforting and caring. She is such a nice person and we always feel good after a visit from Deb.”

Debra is a recent widow, just three years ago losing the love of her life, husband of 43 years, Randy. She has two adult children Elizabeth, who is here tonight, and Eric, both of whom have families and live in Milwaukee. Debra shared she has one brother, Wayne, whom she is very close to and lives in a suburb of Milwaukee with his family.

Debra enjoys spending time with her family, and she takes care of the multiple rental properties she owns in Milwaukee County. She also volunteers for the Wisconsin Vietnam Veterans Association assisting with organizing and conducting the annual Vietnam Veteran annual fund-raiser and family picnic. Additionally, Debra volunteers for the United Yorkie Rescue, fostering Yorkshire Terrier dogs waiting to be adopted. She is fostering four dogs right now in her home.

Debra said, above all, she feels it has been her honor and privilege to have the residents and their families feel comfortable enough to share feelings and life experiences with her, and to be able to let them know they are not alone, that we support them in this part of their journey.

The Board on Aging and Long Term Care is honored to recognize and to present Debra A. Ross with the prestigious Louise Abrahams Yaffe Volunteer Ombudsman Program Award. Congratulations Debra!

Submitted by-

Kellie Miller

Volunteer Services Supervisor

Board on Aging and Long Term Care