



STATE OF WISCONSIN
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Volunteer Ombudsmen Do Make a Difference

Volunteering is an important aspect of American life. People volunteer for a variety of causes and reasons. First and foremost is a desire to create a better world in which to live. Through volunteering, individuals get to experience the self-satisfaction that comes with "making a difference." That is certainly true with the Board on Aging and Long Term Care Volunteer Ombudsman Program.

The Volunteer Ombudsman Program is a service that was developed to supplement the advocacy services of the Long Term Care Ombudsman Program focusing on residents in skilled nursing facilities. Established in 1994 by the Board on Aging and Long Term Care, The Volunteer Ombudsman Program began as a pilot project. And now, 17 years later, it has developed into an expansive program serving hundreds of long term care residents across the state.

Potential Volunteer Ombudsmen are chosen very carefully. Volunteer Coordinators supervise volunteers. They take time to discuss, with each individual, the responsibilities and expectations of being one of our Volunteer Ombudsmen. The Coordinator's make sure there are no conflicts of interest, or "roadblocks" that might interfere with the Volunteer's ability to successfully complete their weekly duties. A criminal background check is conducted prior to the mandatory initial training to assure that there is no criminal history, especially a felony. Screening and appropriate matching of Volunteer Ombudsmen to a long term care facility is very important for resident safety. Potential volunteers participate in a mandatory, interactive and informative seven hour initial training conducted by the area Volunteer Coordinator and a Regional Ombudsman. Volunteers are continuously supported by staff, and have ample opportunity for continued education, networking and recognition throughout their commitment to the program.

Centers of Volunteer Ombudsman Program activity are located in Stevens Point, Milwaukee, Madison, LaCrosse and Green Bay. Over the years, the program has steadily grown and developed into a valuable and respected part of the state's advocacy for our elderly and disabled nursing home residents and we expect that expansion of coverage to continue in the future. We have been fortunate to have great interest from people who want to volunteer and we have had many successful matches to our long term care facilities. This is evident by the fact that many of our Volunteer Ombudsmen have stayed in the program for 5 or more years.

These dedicated people make unannounced, weekly visits for 2-3 hours per visit. Volunteer Ombudsmen spend their time talking with residents, listening to residents, empowering residents to speak up for themselves and being a voice for residents. The volunteer is there to protect the rights of the residents.

The Board on Aging and Long Term Care is not a regulatory agency. We are the premiere advocacy health oversight agency for those elder and disabled citizens who are living in long term care facilities. Things that most people take for granted such as access to a telephone, visitors, privacy, choice of our own physician, choice of clothing, receiving un-opened mail and voting can be out of reach for many who live in long term care facilities. It is the mission of our agency to make sure that residents' rights like these, and more, are protected.

Another important right that must be insured for all residents' is to be able to make complaints and share concerns without fear of retaliation. Many elders are afraid to speak up. Our Volunteer Ombudsmen help them use their own voice to express their concerns and wishes to the facility. If residents cannot speak up on their own behalf in the facility which is, after all, their home, our Volunteer Ombudsmen will be their voice, after making certain that we have their permission.

Volunteer Ombudsmen often can help residents resolve problems that happen, like call lights that are not being answered, food and mealtime issues, lack of interesting and appropriate activity and social involvement, missing laundry, and personal hygiene concerns; all which can be solved, making life much better.

Residents look forward to the visit from "their Volunteer Ombudsman". Most of the people simply want to talk about what went on during the week including the organized activities. The volunteers might attend a particular activity to observe the residents' enjoyment and staff interactions.

Our Volunteer Ombudsmen say that they get more out of being a volunteer than they give to the residents, but we at the Board on Aging and Long Term Care know differently. The dedication and effort of our volunteers serving as advocates for Wisconsin's elderly and frail population is a great gift. The lives of the residents we serve are enhanced by our volunteers and staff at the Board on Aging and Long Term Care.

To find out how you can become a Volunteer Ombudsman in your area, please call **1 800 815-0015** and asked to be directed to the Volunteer Coordinator in your county.

*By: Suzanne Ankenbrandt
Volunteer Coordinator*