

JABA's Long-Term Care Volunteer Ombudsman Program

Background:

The Long-term Care Ombudsman Program was created by federal law in 1978. Under the federal Older American Act, every state is required to have an ombudsman. The state ombudsman's office is located in Richmond, VA. The local ombudsman program serves the jurisdictions of Charlottesville, and the counties of Louisa, Albemarle, Greene, Nelson, and Fluvanna.

What is does the word "ombudsman" mean?

Ombudsman comes from the Swedish word "ombud" which means representative or agent.

What is a volunteer ombudsman?

A volunteer ombudsman is a trained individual advocating for residents residing in nursing homes and assisted living facilities, ensuring the rights of the residents have not been violated. Volunteer ombudsmen work to improve the quality of life for those in long-term care facilities and to provide necessary support to their families.

While the primary role of the Ombudsman is to help residents to help themselves, at times he or she may be asked to speak on behalf of the resident or family member. The volunteer does not have the power to make or alter administrative decisions; however, she does have the power to investigate and to recommend solutions to the issue.

The volunteer is assigned to a specific facility and must be free from a direct conflict of interest.

Is a volunteer ombudsman the same as a "friendly visitor"?

No. A volunteer ombudsman is a friendly advocate who visits the long-term care facility to monitor conditions and *actively represents* the needs of the residents.

What does the volunteer ombudsman do during the weekly visits?

A volunteer ombudsman visits the facility approximately 4 hours per week to monitor conditions, provides a listening ear with regard to any complaints or concerns, and helps residents or their family members resolve problems they are unable to handle alone. The volunteer may visit a resident one-on-one in their room and/or a group of residents in a common area in the facility. Time will be spent building trusting relationships with residents/staff and becoming familiar with non-communicative residents. The volunteer may take on the roles of problem solver and advocate.

What qualities does it take to be an effective volunteer ombudsman?

Objectivity, dedication, persistence, patience, and a sincere interest in persons residing in nursing homes or assisted living facilities is a must for volunteers. Empathy, compassion and a sense of humor are also qualities that will make the volunteer experience rewarding. Volunteer Ombudsmen are not 'fixers'...they are

advocates and they empower the residents. It can take a long time to arrange a small improvement, but it will be greatly appreciated.

What skills does the volunteer ombudsman use?

It's a job that demands listening, observing and mediation skills, the ability to be assertive, but patient, and verbal and written communication skills.

What are typical resident complaints/concerns?

The volunteer ombudsman will hear about concerns from many sources: residents, families, friends, personnel, the administrator, and others. The subject of most of these concerns will be related to nursing care, food, finances, sanitation, activities, hygiene, slow responses to call bells, roommate conflicts and violations of residents' rights.

How does the volunteer ombudsman handle concerns?

The volunteer encourages residents to voice their concerns to the staff themselves and offers support in the process. When necessary, the volunteer ombudsman will take an issue in writing to his or her contact person at the facility and then the volunteer will follow-up with both parties to monitor the situation. Volunteers can also bring their observations directly to the contact person and refer persistent problems to the ombudsman office for further assistance.

How much time is involved?

The volunteer will submit an application to the ombudsman office and participate in an individual interview. Beyond the initial 3 day training class and facility site visit with a current volunteer, the volunteer is asked to make a commitment of 4 hours per week for one year. The hours do not have to be consecutive, as the volunteer can set her own schedule and it can vary from week to week. Volunteer ombudsmen are also encouraged to attend in-service training sessions every other month, usually held in the morning for about 2 hours.

Is there paperwork involved?

Volunteers will keep personal notes about their contacts with residents and staff. These notes will help them to complete the monthly report that is submitted to the volunteer ombudsman specialist by the 1st of every month.

Is supervision provided?

The volunteer ombudsman specialist communicates regularly with the volunteers, either through phone calls, emails, and/or face-to-face meetings. The staff person will also make site visits with the volunteers when necessary. Opportunity for networking with other volunteers is available at the in-service meetings.

