Resources

The Area Agency on Aging & Disabilities of Southwest Washington's Caregiver Corner

By Patti Atkins

Long-term care ombudsmen advocate for residents, families

When a loved one lives in a nursing home, assisted living community or adult family home, family caregivers often are the bridge between the resident and the care system, but questions about care quality, communication, safety and residents' rights can feel overwhelming.

One valuable — and often underused — resource is the long-term care ombudsman program.

A long-term care ombudsman, or ombuds, is an independent advocate for people living in long-term care settings. They help protect residents' rights, address concerns and support families in resolving problems related to care and quality of life. Their services are free and confidential: Ombuds need to have consent to speak with other parties.

The program is authorized under the federal Older Americans Act and exists in every state. Ombuds typically work through regional agencies and may include trained staff and volunteers.

Ombuds assist residents and families with concerns such as:

- Poor communication from facility staff
- Questions about residents' rights
- Problems with meals, hygiene or daily care
- Medication concerns
- Discharge or transfer issues
- Conflicts with staff or other residents
- Lack of activities or social engagement
- Concerns about neglect, abuse or dignity

Their goal is usually to resolve issues collaboratively while centering the wishes and preferences of the resident.

One important aspect of the ombuds program is that the resident's voice comes first. Ombuds advocate according to what the resident wants whenever possible, rather than making decisions on the resident's behalf. This approach helps preserve autonomy, dignity and self-determination — especially important for older adults who may feel they have lost control over many parts of daily life.

Although ombuds are strong advocates, they are not regulators, inspectors or law enforcement officers. They do not issue citations or force facilities to make changes. Instead, they work through mediation, education and advocacy. If there are immediate safety concerns or suspected abuse, ombuds can help connect families with the appropriate protective agencies.

Don't wait for a crisis

Families do not need to have a crisis situation to reach out to an ombuds: An ombuds can be helpful anytime concerns are not being resolved through normal communication channels.

Consider contacting an ombuds if:

- Repeated concerns are going unanswered.
- Your loved one feels unheard or unsafe.
- You are unsure about resident rights.
- You need guidance navigating the long-term care system.
- Communication with the facility has broken down.

Many caregivers report that simply having a neutral advocate involved improves communication and problem-solving.

How to find an ombuds

Every state has a long-term care ombuds program. In Southwest Washington (Clark, Cowlitz, Klickitat, Pacific, Skamania and Wahkiakum counties), the program is housed at the Area Agency on Aging & Disabilities of Southwest Wash-ington. For information, visit https://helpingelders.org/long-term-care-support or call 360-694-9007 (toll free: 800-562-6028). For information on other counties in Washington state, visit waombudsman.org.

The ombuds program at AAADSW is always looking for volunteers. If you are interested in training to become an ombuds, visit https://helpingelders.org/long-term-care-support.

Family caregivers often carry the emotional and practical weight of advocating for loved ones in long-term care. Ombuds provide an additional layer of support — someone knowledgeable, independent and focused on protecting residents' rights and quality of life.

Knowing when and how to use this resource can help families feel more confident, informed, and supported throughout the caregiving journey.

Patti Atkins, APR, is the communications coordinator for the Area Agency on Aging & Disabilities of Southwest Washington. AAADSW serves Clark, Cowlitz, Wahkiakum, Skamania and Klickitat counties, connecting older adults, adults with disabilities and family caregivers to community resources designed to offer choice, improve quality of life and respect independence. For information, contact the Aging & Disability Resource Center at 360-694-8144 (toll-free: 888-637-6060) or ClarkADRC@dshs.wa.gov. To learn more, visit www.HelpingElders.org.