

LIVING IN A NURSING FACILITY

by Denise Underwood, Program Director, Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program

Living in a nursing facility, even temporarily, is not on anyone's top ten list of things they hope to do. However, 15% of us will spend time in a nursing home for at least a limited period sometime in our life.

In Riverside County there are approximately 14,000 people living in licensed long term care facilities. As you are reading this article, there are State Certified Long Term Care Ombudsman volunteers visiting these licensed care facilities—advocating for their residents. Knowing a little about the Long Term Care Ombudsman Program now may help, should you or one of your family members require a nursing home stay sometime in the future.

Each Skilled Nursing Facility (SNF) provides medical care and supervision to approximately one hundred individuals. These individuals have a variety of medical conditions. They are people, just like you and me, all with different backgrounds, preferences and personalities. The SNF's challenge is to provide individualized care to all these people in a timely, cost effective manner. In practical terms, that may mean all one hundred individuals will get the same basic breakfast, at 7:30 a.m., every morning. Or it might mean, every one gets a shower on Tuesday and Friday afternoons. Or everyone attends Bingo on Wednesday mornings. But what if you don't like what's being served for breakfast? What if you haven't had breakfast before 9:00 a.m. for the past twenty years? What if you'd rather play Poker? What if you'd rather have a shower in the morning? According to federal and state regulations, SNF's must make reasonable accommodations of personal preferences. Furthermore, nursing home resident's have the right to make choices regarding their daily schedules.

Did you know there are Federal and State rights for nursing home residents? What if you do not want to take the medications the facility is suggesting to your physician? Maybe the facility is recommending hospice care for your spouse or discontinuing physical therapy and you don't agree. The law says you have the right to refuse and the right to appeal. The representatives of the Long Term Care Ombudsman Program are trained extensively on Resident Rights and use this knowledge to mediate resolution to the resident's concerns.

One of these rights is the right to file a grievance against the facility without fear of retaliation. The Long Term Care Ombudsman Program has been investigating complaints made by or on behalf nursing home residents since it's inception by the Older Americans Act in 1975. Their goal is to resolve these complaints at the lowest level possible thereby improving the quality of care and quality of life for the resident involved. This service is free and confidential. The Program never releases the identity of the resident nor the complainant without there permission. Representatives of the program typically work discretely behind the scenes. By using the resident's expressed wishes and the law, the Program representatives work with all parties involved to achieve a resolution that empowers



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the nursing home residents, enhances their dignity and improves their lives.

The Long Term Care Ombudsman Program of Riverside County is part of the non-profit agency, The Volunteer Center of Riverside County. The Program is volunteer-driven.

Because the Program serves the residents of approximately 400 assisted living facilities and 54 skilled nursing facilities, volunteers are always needed. The Program interviews interested individuals and selects those qualified to receive the State approved 36 hour training. On completion of the training, individuals must pass a final exam and mentor with a seasoned ombudsman in the field before being recommended for certification by the Program Director.

Once certified, each Ombudsman will be assigned licensed care facilities to visit. The visits are focused work that require the assigned ombudsman to build trust and rapport with the residents, document accurate, factual observations of the facility, investigate complaints and create professional working relationships with facility staff. The Program asks for a time commitment of twenty hours per month for a year. Interested parties or anyone with a concern regarding a nursing home resident may contact the ombudsman Program at 1-800-464-1123.

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