

CLAIM YOUR REWARDS: BE A VOLUNTEER OMBUDSMAN

I'm embarrassed to say that I've worked much of my life thinking my work was valuable because I was being paid. I thought volunteering was a worthy pursuit for those who didn't work and had the time to devote to a special interest. Oh, I've volunteered at my church, for worthy causes for short periods of time, but my volunteering experience was limited.

After retiring, I looked around for volunteer possibilities. I wanted to make a difference in the lives of people, but I didn't know yet what that looked like. It seems when you put your mind on a purpose, something or someone pops up with the information you need. A new acquaintance mentioned she was a volunteer ombudsman for the elderly in long-term care facilities. I was immediately attracted to the idea. My mother had been in a nursing home for a short time before she died and I saw first hand how vulnerable the residents were and how much they needed advocates to speak for them.

I enrolled in volunteer ombudsman training at the Area Agency on Aging. I was given all the preparation I needed but I still felt a little nervous to go out on my own. My confidence grew quickly as I saw positive results from my facility visits and how much my presence was appreciated by the residents.

Did you know that residents of long-term care facilities, by law, are guaranteed quality of care and quality of life? Quality of care includes services and activities that promote well-being. Quality of life means kind treatment, dignity, respect, choice and privacy. As an ombudsman, I'm concerned that those guaranteed rights are honored.

Recently I visited Robert D. who was eating lunch in his room. He seemed depressed. I asked him if he would like to eat in the dining room but he was unable to express his wishes. I talked to the Director of Nursing and she instructed his new aides to take him to the dining room for meals. Two days later when I visited, Robert D. was eating his lunch in the dining room and seemed much happier. His quality of life has improved.

I also talked with Jeffrey K. who complained that his son gave the facility a list of people allowed to visit him. The son has Jeffrey's Power of Attorney to pay Jeffrey's bills and manage his bank accounts, not to make other decisions that Jeffrey is capable of making on his own. My job was to inform Jeffrey of his right to choose who can visit him and to make sure the facility honors his choice and privacy. "My friend, Mike, is coming to visit tomorrow," Jeffrey told me this morning. His smile was all the reward I needed. His rights of choice and privacy were honored.

If you'd like to make a difference in the lives of elders living in long-term care facilities, please contact Jan Noyes at the Area Agency on Aging, 208-667-3179 or jnoyes@aaani.org. A new volunteer ombudsman training is planned for September. We have 18 volunteers now and welcome more. Join us. It may be one of the most rewarding things you ever do.

By Jan Noyes, August, 2008