

PROTECT THE RIGHTS OF ELDERS IN LONG TERM CARE

Love, dignity, respect, and choice are necessary for living a quality life. As we age or if our physical or mental condition declines should those cherished qualities no longer apply? Of course not, but it happens every day and right under our noses.

Elders moving into long term care facilities must face that life has changed forever. The positive view is that it is safer and healthier. But how many of us really want to give up the life we've led that defines who we are? These elders are the people who have made the world go round. They have a history....they made history.

Even when the change is the best alternative, it may not be enough to make up for what is lost. They have lost the freedom to move about, or go where they want when they want. Many need physical assistance that makes them feel like children. They want to be treated as adult individuals no matter what their condition. One resident's words, "I'm still the same on the inside."

How can you help? How can you make a positive difference in an elderly resident's life? More volunteer ombudsmen are needed to visit long-term care facilities. An ombudsman is a voice for residents when they are too vulnerable to speak for themselves or when their voices go unheard. Ombudsmen are their advocates, champions for their rights, their quality of care and their quality of life. One of the most important aspects of an ombudsman's job is listening. When a resident has a problem that needs solving, an ombudsman is there to listen and help find a solution.

Most facilities try to do a good job for the elders in their care, but not all facilities or care-givers are equal. No matter how much a facility desires to meet all the needs of all the residents, there are inevitably problems that threaten a resident's rights, quality of life and quality of care. Residents have the right to make choices, to have privacy and to be free of neglect and abuse. Facilities must provide quality personal care in a comfortable and stimulating environment. However, facilities have budget issues, staff issues and training issues. There are times when the financial bottom line becomes the most important issue.

If you've ever been a care-giver, you know how difficult it can be. There is a special place in heaven for caring, concerned and loving care-givers. You'll find them in long-term care facilities everywhere. However, you'll also find those who have forgotten that loving care for the residents takes priority over staying on schedule. The good ones know how much a smile and a kind word mean, how important it is to be handled with care, and how respectful it is to honor individual choice. They know it's not so much about the resident adjusting to the facility as the facility adjusting to the wants and needs of the elders living there. The good facilities know how important love, respect, dignity and choice are to the people they care for.

Please join us in becoming a part of our Volunteer Ombudsman Program. You are needed. The next training will be Sept.-Oct. in Coeur d'Alene. The trainings thoroughly prepare the volunteers. It may be one of the most rewarding things you ever do. For more information contact Jan Noyes at the Area Agency on Aging, 667-3179 or jnoyes@aaani.org.

By Jan Noyes, July, 2009