

Ombudsmen: Volunteers speak out for county's most vulnerable residents

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Hahn, 67, is a retired sheriff's support division supervisor. She is one of four ombudsmen in Clatsop County who work on behalf of those who live in state-licensed nursing homes, assisted-living facilities, memory-care facilities and adult foster homes.

The word "ombudsman" comes from the Swedish language, where there are government officials appointed to receive and investigate complaints against public officials.

In Clatsop County, they are advocates working on behalf

of some of the county's most vulnerable citizens.

Hahn has been a volunteer ombudsman for 8 1/2 years.

"Both my father and uncle were in nursing homes and I was their go-to person, the one making decisions and making sure they were taken care of," she said. "After they passed away, I saw an ad in the newspapers. I wished I'd have known about the program; I'd have used it."

Don Mellison, 73, of Hammond also was lured to the program 1 1/2 years ago after reading a notice in the newspaper about the need for vol-

unteers.

"I started with Meals on Wheels. That was my something to do after retirement," said Mellison, a former civil engineer with the Oregon Department of Forestry. "I just never knew I had a heart for seniors until I retired. And I just love it."

Volunteers must be at least 21, have transportation and be able to pass a criminal background check and conflict of interest screening. There are 48 hours of initial training, plus 16 hours of continuing education annually.

Some of the issues ombuds-

To learn more

Information can be found on the Oregon Long-Term Care Ombudsman website, oltco.org and click on the "Volunteer Opportunities" box on the left side of the page.

Or call 800-522-2602.

men see and handle are disputes and complaints over food, smoking issues, lost property, financial issues and quality of care such as cleanliness, bedsores and medication distribution.

"A lot of people are intim-

idated about living in those facilities and they find a great deal of comfort knowing there's someone who will advocate for them," Mellison said. "They get to know you and trust you."

One of his most rewarding experiences was helping a woman who was being released from the Medicaid rolls and booted out of her care facility. Medicaid had contended she didn't need such a high level of care.

"We asked for a second evaluation and I attended," Mellison said. "I just think my presence there helped. ... I had to encourage her several times to answer each question based on her worst day. If you can't do something one day a week, you can't do it."

She was allowed to stay at the facility.

"She was very grateful, as was her family," Mellison said.

The Oregon Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program has a small group of paid staff members and many volunteers.

"The program is unique as it is independent from other state agencies and solely dedicated to advocacy and resolution of complaints on behalf of residents living in licensed ... facilities," said Melissa Bosworth, deputy state ombudsman.

Residents of Clatsop County are well served by its four certified volunteers, Bosworth said.

The office needs several more willing to work in the Tillamook area, where there are six state-licensed long-term care facilities.

"This role is best suited to someone who enjoys a flexible schedule, has four hours a week to give and a willingness to learn and use listening and problem-solving skills," Bosworth said.

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