

Ombudsmen Work As Advocates For Seniors In Long-Term Care, Are Especially Important In Pandemic

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ALTON - During an especially difficult time such as this, while the COVID-19 Pandemic continues, senior citizens in long-term health care need advocates to express their point of views about how the seniors should be cared for, and to help protect them from those who don't have their best interests at heart.

At Senior Services Plus, the ombudsman is the important link between the senior and their wishes, acting as their advocate and providing a friendly voice who truly cares about the senior.

"As an ombudsman, what we do, we are advocates for people living in long-term care facilities," said Chris Sutton, who serves as a regional ombudsman for SSP. "This could be nursing homes, assisted living, support livings, DD facilities, any place like that. Our job is to go and speak to folks, trying to find out if they're being treated correctly, if they have any problems or concerns. And then, what we do is advocate for them to have their rights as they're supposed to have them with the facility staff and whomever we need to talk to, and try to make things right for them. We cover seven counties in the Riverbend area, we're called Area eight. The counties we have are Madison, Bond, Clinton, St. Clair, Randolph, Monroe and Washington counties."

The task of being an ombudsman is a most important one, indeed, because it's very important to make sure that the person who's living in a long-term care facility is listened to properly, and to make sure that their needs are being met.

"It's very important, because people who live in long-term care facilities historically have not always gotten what they're supposed to get," Sutton said. "A lot of times, it's because for whatever reason, there's not enough staff, or sometimes, people are afraid to speak because they're afraid they're going to get in trouble. So our job --- and this is part of the Older Americans Act, because this program's through all 50 states --- our job is to let these people have a voice in what their care's going to be like, because sometimes, you get these hospital models where they tell the residents what they're going to be doing and how they're going to do it, instead of actually talking to the residents themselves, and seeing what kind of care they want, and how they want their care to take place.

"We try to remind staff member that this place is their home," Sutton continued, "it's not just a place where the staff works, these people actually live there. And sometimes, that's hard, because the day-to-day thing, it's hard for staff. But we're there to remind them that they should be providing person-centered care to these residents, and also, they deserve certain kinds of treatment as provided by regulations. We also help residents who are being exploited financially by outside the facility, by family members or other people like that who might have access to their money. And so, we work very closely with other agencies to make sure that stops."

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has made things especially difficult, with only staffers allowed to enter a facility, making in-person contact next to impossible. The ombudsmen, instead, are making phone calls to check up on their clients, making sure that they're being taken care of.

"Ever since the outbreak of COVID-19 --- that's been early March," Sutton said, "we've not been allowed to go into facilities face-to-face, as all the facilities right now, per order of the state and the federal government, are very, very selective about who they let in. Basically, it's just the staff gets in, and family members, only when there's an end-of-life incident going on with the resident. Otherwise, everyone's kept out. So, it's really difficult right now, because we're not allowed to go into facilities. What we've been doing, we've been calling every facility every two weeks, we've been calling a resident of each facility at least once every two weeks, if not more frequently.

"And now, we're actually starting to go out to go out to facilities, and staying outside, what we call window visits. So we'll be able to see each resident, we'll have a phone, and the person will have a phone; the facility will provide those. And we'll be actually starting to meet people --- actually, we've already started meeting people face-to-face through the window. We're not through open windows or anything like that, we're very safe, so there's no chance of contamination. And so, we're going out there as much as we can, and looking at the people. letting them talk just through the phone. or even writing notes or things like that. It's difficult, but we're doing everything we can to make sure these residents are heard, and we get what's going on with them."

The ombudsmen are always working vigilantly on the job, with many advocates assigned to the major cities in their area.

"So event though this COVID-19 thing is going on, we're still on the job," Sutton said. "We have three of us here in Alton, there's two of us in Belleville, we're out constantly, we're calling constantly. Our focus and our mission has not changed. We're out there, listening to the residents, listening to them and getting what's going on. We are taking that information and passing on to the appropriate agencies, if it needs to be reported that way. We continue to advocate for them with staff, trying to get them the proper care, the right kind of food, anything they need to make them more comfortable in this very difficult time, because this is a tough time for us. Imagine being behind four walls, in your room, and not being able to get out at all, or very little. And so, this is very difficult for them, and we're doing everything we can, not only to make sure that they're getting their rights, but also they see a friendly face now and again, and they get a friendly voice on the phone, letting them know that somebody else cares."

