

# Area Agency on Aging *Connections*

## Ombudsmen volunteers fill special service niche for area seniors

By Daniel Casciato  
For Pittsburgh Senior News

Volunteers are essential to the Allegheny County Department of Human Services Area Agency on Aging (ACAAA) network. Local seniors volunteer in many ways for programs such as Home Delivered Meals, Senior Companions, APPRISE counseling and at Senior Community Centers. One of the more challenging volunteer opportunities is the Long Term-Care Ombudsman Program. An ombudsman is an advocate for nursing home and personal care home residents, helping to resolve problems related to rights and quality of care.

As a volunteer ombudsman with ACAA, West Mifflin resident Philip Slaugh, 75, serves as the eyes and ears of the Ombudsman Program. He visits residents in nursing homes or other long-term care facilities, and establishes a regular presence in facilities that he is assigned to.

"I enjoy working with these seniors and getting them to open up to me and tell me their problems so I could see if I could fix them," said Philip. "While I was in the service, I learned how to establish a rapport with people and get them to talk to me."

Ombudsmen inform and educate seniors, service providers and the public about long-term care services and consumers' rights. An ombudsman also monitors the quality of care and services, as well as quality of life issues, to ensure that seniors are being provided with appropriate care and services.

"We hope to enhance the quality of care seniors receive and their quality of life," said Toni Allen, ombudsman caseworker supervisor. "We work in cooperation and partner with residents so we are a resident-directed program."

"Not only do we visit nursing home facilities but we also visit personal care homes and sometimes private homes," added Wilmarie Gonzalez, state LTC ombudsman. "The program is all about self-resolution and



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Ombudsman Phil Slaugh listens to the concerns of Catherine Magnes.

consumer empowerment. That's the emphasis of the ombudsman program."

Wilmarie believes that it's important to have visibility in long-term care facilities. "As our older population continues to grow, we have more needs for volunteers to help us visit these facilities. People see us and respect us and acknowledge the program. We have volunteer needs throughout the state."

In order to become an advocate, volunteers have to go through a one-day Tier 1 state certification program. Volunteers are paired with staff ombudsmen, although volunteers are permitted to do independent visits. As a Tier 2 ombudsman, volunteers can begin to investigate complaints from seniors or their caregivers. You must be a Tier 1 volunteer for at least a year and complete a three-day state certification program to advance to this level.

Allegheny County's ombudsman program has six staff members assigned by geographic location: south, north, northwest, northeast and east. ACAA currently has 26 volunteer ombudsmen. As of the 2004-05 fiscal year, there were 562 statewide volunteer ombudsmen.

"It's an increase from the previous year," said Wilmarie. "But our goal is to continue to expand our volunteer base."

Although anyone can become an ombudsman, Philip believes that seniors make the best ones. "We are better able to meet the needs of those residing in long-term care facilities and nursing homes because we are the same age," he said. "Their experiences are our experiences and that makes it very easy to relate to them."

Philip encourages other seniors to volunteer. "This program can't function without the assistance of volunteers," he said. "I'd like to see more seniors give it a try."

Toni agreed. "The volunteers are really a part of our team and the benefit that I see from the volunteer ombudsman program in the facilities is just tremendous," she said. "It really helps us to be able to reach residents and be a visible presence in those facilities. Since I only have six staff ombudsmen, it's very difficult to visit a facility as much as you want. Volunteers bring our program to the residents. I have a lot of respect for them."

Through its service programs, ACAA offers area seniors a variety of rewarding volunteer opportunities:

### APPRISE Program

Many seniors have been assisted with Medicare D through the APPRISE Program. As an APPRISE volunteer, seniors undergo an initial three-day training process to learn about Medicare and other

insurances. The initial training is followed by state and regional training seminars each year. This assures that the counselors are current with changes and updates.

### Senior Companion Program

The Senior Companion Program helps frail, homebound seniors who are in need of assistance and support from a companion. Senior companions visit seniors in their homes to provide companionship and assist with daily activities. The program's goal is to help dispel loneliness through a friendly, personal visit. In Allegheny County alone, 110 senior companions provide more than 114,000 hours of service to about 500 county residents each year.

To become a senior companion, an individual must be age 60 or older, in reasonably good health, and would need to complete an ACAA training program. Once training is completed, a companion will visit homebound seniors weekly to keep them company and assist with light tasks.

Senior companions receive a weekly, tax-free stipend of \$51 for 20 hours of volunteer work. The stipend does not affect SSI, Social Security or Public Assistance. They also receive meal and transportation reimbursement and an annual physical examination.

### Senior Centers

Senior center volunteers are always needed, as the centers depend on the services and dedication of volunteers. There are currently about 3,000 volunteers at various regional senior centers throughout the county.

### Home Delivered Meals

Volunteers are also needed for the Home Delivered Meals program, often referred to as Meals on Wheels, for homebound seniors. Volunteers are the lifeline of the program; they are needed to help package food and deliver meals. At the time of delivery, volunteers also visit seniors and check on their welfare.

For information about volunteering through ACAA, call Senior-Line at (412) 350-5460. *PSN*