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Ombudsmen keep watchful eyes on nursing homes

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By BOB MOOS / The Dallas Morning News

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Jennelle Dixson zigzags down the hall of a South Dallas nursing home, poking her head in residents' rooms. "Good morning," she says to one wheelchair-bound man watching television. "How was breakfast?" The casual greeting prompts a complaint about skimpy meals. Dixson sits down and asks the man what he's eaten lately. She pulls out her notebook and starts writing. Within the hour, she'll raise the issue with the staff.

In a few days, she'll check with the man to make sure the servings have gotten bigger.

"The residents here count on me," she says. "I can't let them down – they're like members of my own family."

Dixson is a nursing home ombudsman who looks out for residents too frail or too afraid to speak up about problems such as inattentive caregivers, dirty bedding and long delays in getting medication.

Ombudsmen are among the most important watchdogs of the nursing home industry.

The frequent prods and nudges they give nursing home administrators can have almost as much influence on the quality of care as the annual inspections that government regulators make.

Checking in

The Senior Source, the nonprofit agency that runs the state's long-term ombudsman program in Dallas County, sends ombudsmen to 63 nursing homes at least once a month and 160 assisted-living communities at least twice a year.

Dixson checks on more than 1,000 residents in 17 nursing homes throughout Dallas. She visits most of the homes weekly, and many patients know her by her first name and look forward to seeing her.

"At some of my nursing homes, I rarely see other visitors," she said. "I don't understand why. I guess people don't like to set foot in nursing homes because they're scared they'll end up in one themselves."

Many will become patients sooner or later, though. Forty-three percent of Americans who reach 65 can expect to spend time in one of the nation's 15,281 nursing homes. The average stay is almost 2 ½ years.

Dixson acts as an advocate for all of her nursing home residents but feels a particularly strong bond with the half who never or rarely have visitors to listen to them and cast a watchful eye.

On her recent walk through the South Dallas nursing home, Dixson encountered concerns ranging from the routine to the potentially dangerous.

At one point, she asked the staff to clear cleaning carts from the hallways so residents wouldn't have to steer wheelchairs around the obstacles.

Moments later, a resident pulled her aside to say he was worried he hadn't seen his doctor lately.

Getting results

Though ombudsmen occasionally meet an uncooperative administrator, their surprise visits usually produce results because most nursing homes prefer to resolve issues before they escalate into black marks during state inspections.

"At the end of each visit, the ombudsman sits down with me and goes over the concerns she's found," said Jeff Moffitt, executive director of Traymore Nursing Center in Dallas. "Then we discuss how to address them."

"I know the ombudsman is here as an advocate for the residents, but she's also a resource for us because she brings another set of eyes and ears to our place and helps us catch problems early," he said.

Last year, the Senior Source's ombudsmen received 8,600 complaints about nursing homes and 600 complaints about assisted-living communities in Dallas County, said Suzanna Swanson, the program's director.

The ombudsmen won't act on a complaint unless they have the nursing home patient's permission, she said. And the patient's name is confidential to guard against retaliation from the staff.

Swanson says complaints involving abuse or serious neglect go to the Texas Department of Aging and Disability Services, the state agency that inspects and regulates nursing homes and assisted-living communities.

"The most common complaint we receive is that caregivers take too long to answer residents' call buttons," Swanson said. "Patients may wait an hour for aides to escort them to the bathroom."

Leander Boone, who's been in two Dallas nursing homes since he suffered a stroke in 2005, said his complaints about a broken bed fell on deaf ears until his ombudsman stepped in.

"The next day, the staff brought a new bed, and I could finally sit up," he said. "Nursing homes probably mean well, but you have to keep them on their toes. Otherwise, they're forgetful. Without an ombudsman, I'd be lost."

Volunteer help

In addition to staff members like Dixson, the Senior Source's ombudsman program relies on trained volunteers like Ruth Hancock, a Dallas retiree who visits one nursing home and one assisted-living community each week.

"It's the most satisfying thing I do all week," she said. "I walk in the door, and the residents call me by my first name."

Hancock said she became a volunteer ombudsman after she went to visit a nursing home resident and noticed a rude caregiver. When Hancock reported the bad behavior to the staff, she was told it was none of her business.

"I decided to make it my business," she said. "Now, as an ombudsman, if I see something wrong, I know I'll be heard."

Swanson says the program needs more volunteers to champion the rights of nursing home residents. "People don't lose their rights when they enter a nursing home," she said. "Caregivers sometimes forget that."

Because ombudsmen have up-to-date information on the quality of care at local nursing homes and assisted-living communities, they have become good resources for families looking for a place for a parent or spouse.

The program provides information packets and fields calls from people overwhelmed by the task, Swanson said.

"We don't recommend specific nursing homes, but we can help families narrow their searches and answer questions about staff turnover or common resident complaints at particular facilities," she said.

Though there's no perfect nursing home, some try harder than others, Swanson said.

"On the other hand, some nursing homes are all about the profits, and when that's the case, they can't be about the residents," she said. "That's where our ombudsmen can make the most difference."

CONTACT INFORMATION

Need an advocate or want to volunteer?

The ombudsman program fields questions and complaints about nursing homes and assisted-living communities. The program is also recruiting people interested in volunteering as ombudsmen. In Dallas County, call **214-823-5700**. Outside Dallas County, call **1-800-252-2412**.

GRIEVANCES

Most common nursing home complaints:

1. The staff doesn't respond to residents' call lights.
2. The staff is rude.
3. The food is cold or bland.
4. The building needs repair.
5. The staff doesn't give out medication properly.

SOURCE: Senior Source

