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Advocacy Group Announces New Resource for Long-Term Care Residents

TALLAHASSEE, FL – The Florida Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program has announced the commemoration of Long-Term Care Residents' Rights Month 2018 with the release of an important new resource for long-term care residents looking to organize resident councils within nursing homes, assisted living facilities, and adult family care homes.

"Governor Rick Scott has proclaimed October Residents Rights Month in Florida, and the Department proudly supports the efforts of the Ombudsman Program throughout October – and year-round – as they tirelessly advocate for residents of long-term care facilities," said Jeffrey Bragg, Secretary for the Florida Department of Elder Affairs. "The creation of this resident council guide is an important step in equipping residents to self-advocate and is another example of how the Program is resident-centered and empowering."

The Resident Council Handbook: A Guide to Building a Long-Term Care Resident Council emphasizes the role of a resident council as a catalyst for improving quality of care and quality of life within longterm care homes. A resident council is composed entirely of long-term care residents and is directed by them. While nursing and administrative staff may assist a council upon request, residents recruit council leadership, control council meetings, and determine council actions based upon consensus among members.

State Long-Term Care Ombudsman Michael Milliken spearheaded yearlong efforts to develop the guide upon recommendation by the State Long-Term Care Ombudsman Council, an advisory body composed of long-term care ombudsmen elected by their peers throughout the Program's statewide service areas.

"Previously, Florida long-term care residents did not have access to tools to create and strengthen councils. We hope its use encourages collaborative efforts by long-term care administrators and staff to support the rights and input of residents regarding their care. Through the exercise of their rights, long-term care residents can demonstrate empowerment through self-advocacy," stated Milliken.

A resident council functions as an instrument of self-advocacy and is the most effective starting point for addressing more common community-wide concerns regarding daily living within a long-term care home. The Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program shares the goals of resident councils to promote and protect residents' independence, rights, and dignity. Long-term care residents, their loved ones, and concerned individuals who would like more information regarding developing a strong resident council and receiving a copy of the guide are encouraged to contact the Program.

"No one is more qualified to speak about concerns within the long-term care home than residents themselves. Residents share unique challenges and understand long-term care more intimately than anyone else. They are bound together by a common home life. A council provides residents

a forum to come together on a common cause and strengthen their community within the home,” Milliken said.

The Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program begins distributing handbooks to over 4,000 long-term care homes throughout Florida this October, coinciding with National Long-Term Care Residents’ Rights Month. Residents’ Rights Month, which is annually celebrated each October to increase awareness of long-term care residents’ rights. This year’s theme is “Speak Up: Know Your Rights and How to Use Them” and emphasizes residents actively engaging as partners in achieving quality care within their homes. “Residents call long-term care facilities home,” said Milliken, “Every resident should feel they are safe and have input into how they live and are treated. Being aware of their rights increases the ability for residents to exercise self-determination.”

During Residents’ Rights Month, long-term care residents, family members, long-term care ombudsmen, advocates, long-term care staff, and others will engage in celebratory and informational events throughout Florida, driven by local needs and efforts. Those interested in learning more about becoming an advocate may contact the Program toll-free at 1-888-831-0404.

The Florida Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program, administratively housed at the Florida Department of Elder Affairs, provides free and confidential services to long-term care residents, carried out by close to 300 volunteers, called ombudsmen. Long-term care ombudsmen advocate for residents’ health, safety, welfare, and rights; provide community education and consultations; investigate complaints made by or on behalf of residents; and conduct annual assessments of residents’ quality of care and quality of life. They work to resolve any concerns to the satisfaction of residents. During the last reporting year, staff and volunteer ombudsmen completed over 8,800 assessments and visitations, provided over 15,000 consultations, and investigated over 5,400 complaints.

Below are actual examples of long-term care residents’ exercising their rights leading to improvement in their quality of life.

Example 1: A wheelchair bound resident did not have accessible transportation for months, leaving the resident unable to attend doctor appointments. Though the resident was promised transportation on several occasions, time continued to pass with no action taken. After the long-term care ombudsman began advocating on the resident’s behalf, transportation continued to be unavailable. The ombudsman then arranged a meeting with corporate representatives of the long-term care home to advocate for the resident. Within a week, an accessible vehicle was delivered to the home.

Example 2: An air conditioning system had been leaking water into a resident’s room for months, even after the resident had made the issue known to management. As time passed, the carpeting and furniture in the resident’s room became wet and damaged from the leak. A long-term care ombudsman noticed the conditions during a routine visit and advocated for the resident’s right to a safe and healthy environment. The leak was soon repaired, and water damaged items were replaced.

Example 3: The long-term care ombudsman was contacted by several residents concerned about staff attitudes toward them, their requests for help not being answered, and their personal choices not being respected. Residents were surprised to learn about their right to file complaints, request care plan meetings, voice concerns, choose their own physician, and communicate with the home administrator. After speaking up, the residents expressed satisfaction with participating in their care and discovering their voices did matter.

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The Florida Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program, administratively housed at the Department of Elder Affairs, seeks to improve the quality of life and care for all Florida long-term care residents. Learn more at ombudsman.myflorida.com. Like us on Facebook.

The Department of Elder Affairs fully supports the authority of the Office of the State Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program to independently advocate for the health, safety, welfare, and rights of long-term care residents. Consequently, the views and opinions expressed by the Office may not represent the official policy or position of the Department of Elder Affairs or its employees.