

**New Jersey Department of the Public Advocate  
240 W. State Street  
Trenton, NJ 08625**

Jon S. Corzine  
Governor

Ronald K. Chen  
Public Advocate

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Contact:  
Laurie Brewer  
609-826-5054  
Eva Balter  
609-655-5933

## Volunteerism trumps leisure trips for this active Middlesex County senior citizen

MONROE TOWNSHIP -- A resident of an active adult living community, **Eva Balter of Monroe Township**, has plenty of opportunities to spend her leisure time.

But she was not particularly interested in the social activities planned by community staff, including the regular trips to Atlantic City.

“I don’t play cards or knit. I wanted to do something to make myself feel better. When you volunteer, you get so much out of it,” Balter said.

So, after learning about the state’s volunteer ombudsman program through a friend, she decided to donate her time at a nearby nursing facility.

Every week, Balter spends several hours visiting the elderly at the **Applegarth Healthcare and Rehabilitation Center In Monroe Township (Middlesex County)**, making sure that the residents’ needs are met regarding care and quality of life issues.

She is one of the 200 participants in the Volunteer Advocate program, responsible for reporting any cases of suspected abuse and neglect to the Ombudsman for the Institutionalized Elderly, which operates under the Department of the Public Advocate.

The office is mandated by law to investigate reports of abuse and neglect of people age 60 and older living in nursing homes and other long-term care facilities. Volunteer Advocates visit elder residents regularly and keep an eye on quality of care issues, resolve problems and provide companionship for elderly residents.

During her visit, she makes her rounds, speaking with residents- many she knows by name, noting any concerns they have and introducing herself to the new arrivals.

“I enjoy the social interactions between residents. I look forward to coming to see them, and I’ve established a very good relationship with staff. They know I’m not there to spy or criticize,” she said.

Sometimes, the complaints are roommate problems. Other times, it’s the food. For issues like these, Balter addresses them first-hand.

“I came in for lunch and dinner, and while I didn’t eat the food, I saw that there wasn’t really a problem. By the smell and what I saw, the food looked good in the dining room,” she observed.

While volunteers serve as an extra pair of eyes and ears for the state’s ombudsman, for Balter, it’s also the opportunity to connect with residents that makes her experience most meaningful.

“There was one resident who was an avid reader. We would discuss books and I would bring paperbacks,” she recalled.

It also makes one realize how precious life is.

“The hardest thing is when a long-term resident dies. It’s difficult for staff and the residents, because you naturally become attached to them. It’s especially hard if they were perfectly healthy and pass away unexpectedly,” she said.

Sometimes Balter is the only regular visitor these residents have, but “fortunately, they don’t realize the time between visits.”

Volunteer ombudsmen try to resolve issues as close to the bedside as possible, referring complaints of abuse, neglect, and exploitation for investigation to the Office of the Ombudsman for the Institutionalized Elderly (OOIE).

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*The success of the Volunteer Advocate Program is predicated on the dedication and devotion of citizens in New Jersey who willingly give back to their communities, and their ability to effectively resolve issues on behalf of the population we serve. Volunteers must complete a 32 hour training program to become a certified Ombudsman Advocate.*

*If you are interested in becoming a volunteer advocate, please contact Joann Cancel at 609-943-4022 or via email at [joann.cancel@advocate.state.nj.us](mailto:joann.cancel@advocate.state.nj.us).*