

Retired Physical Therapist Fosters Better Living for Nursing Home Residents

After 43 years as a physical therapist — working primarily with older adults — Barbara Weiner knew her way around nursing homes, and she had an affinity with the individuals living there.

Helping to make their lives better went from a professional pursuit to a post-retirement passion when she became a Certified Volunteer Advocate (CVA) for the New Jersey Office of the Long-Term Care Ombudsman.

A lifelong New Jersey resident, Barbara has lived in Bergen County, Mercer County, and, for the past seven years, Somerset County. She is married with grown children and several grandchildren. Barbara enjoys biking, hiking, kayaking, yoga, and camping.

“I heard about the program from an ad on the radio and immediately felt it was something I would enjoy,” said Barbara. “After retirement, I was interested in volunteer work, and being an Advocate was a good fit for me.”

CVAs fill a crucial role for the Office of the Long-Term Care Ombudsman (LTCO), proactively visiting nursing homes to help solve problems for residents and ensure they are treated with dignity and respect. When serious issues such as abuse, neglect or exploitation are identified, a full-time LTCO Investigator/Advocate may be assigned to investigate and resolve them.

[Becoming a CVA](#) is a straightforward process. Applicants receive 36 hours of in-depth, virtual and in-person training and take a certification exam. Once certified, applicants shadow experienced CVAs until they are ready for solo assignments visiting nursing homes near where they live. Each CVA receives ongoing guidance and support from a Regional Coordinator.

Barbara was assigned to a Bridgewater nursing home with about 160 residents. She visits regularly — unannounced — and meets with a group of active residents who voice concerns for themselves and others. While there, she will pop into nearly every room to say hello and check in with residents she has not seen. She also tries to attend monthly meetings of the Resident Council and Food Council, two resident-run groups at the nursing home.

Food service complaints are frequently relayed to Barbara, along with concerns about understaffing, the wait times for staff members to respond to call bells, and fundamental quality-of-life issues such as TV reception.

“I have gained the confidence and trust of many residents, as well as some family members,” Barbara said. “My visits are well-received and very much appreciated by the residents. They know I listen to what they have to say.”

Residents also are confident that Barbara will communicate their concerns to her primary contact, the nursing home Social Worker, and the Administrator. Maintaining a good working

relationship with them helps Barbara resolve problems and promote better quality of life for residents.

“Residents need an advocate,” Barbara said. “They need to feel safe expressing their concerns and frustrations. They need to see that they matter.”

###