

Retired Teacher Goes to Bat for South Jersey Nursing Home Residents

To say that Lisa Downs has a rich and varied background would be a bit of an understatement.

A master's-level graduate of Trenton State College—now The College of New Jersey—she taught for 30 years, mostly in public schools, and consistently volunteered for school and community events.

After retiring from teaching in 2011, she spent nine summers as a naturalist at Batsto, the historic village located in the Pine Barrens, not far from the home where Lisa and her husband have lived for 27 years. She also volunteered with her community's Forestry Program and has served for 15 years on the Planning and Zoning Board.

And somewhere in there, she heard radio ads on NPR seeking Certified Volunteer Advocates (CVAs) for nursing home residents. The youngest of five siblings, Lisa had helped her mother navigate the eldercare system years earlier. Lisa was intrigued by the ads.

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 Investigator/Advocate from the LTCO 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 placement in a nursing home near where they live.

Lisa, who became a CVA in March 2019, was assigned to an Atlantic County-owned and operated nursing home. She tries to see as many residents as she can each visit, particularly people she has gotten to know over the years and those whose family members are estranged or live far away.

She mostly hears concerns about the food, activities, and staffing issues. Lisa said she gets a sense of satisfaction from helping with concerns that might seem minor but are vital to residents: helping them get access to WiFi and order things online, for example, addressing dietary concerns, making sure they have a list of their medicines, or tracking down a staff member to answer a call bell.

"I enjoy the residents!" she said. "I love listening to their stories and simply being with them."

Lisa is currently advocating for better training and continuing education for staff to improve their interactions with residents who may have mental health issues.

"Being a Certified Volunteer Advocate is an opportunity to help people who often don't have a voice, or whose voices are ignored," Lisa said. "It's emotionally challenging to be a resident in a nursing home. Your presence, your willingness to listen and to go to bat for them means so

much. They look forward to your visits, and you become like family. It's an amazing experience."

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