

Author/Blogger/Traveler Now Advocates for Better Nursing Home Living

You know that dream of buying an RV and living on the open road? Muriel Smith is one of the people who actually did it.

In 1995, after Muriel retired from a career in journalism, she and her late husband sold their home in Highlands and set out on a road trip adventure, living in the RV for about 10 years. Muriel has visited all 50 states and the birthplace or burial site of 28 U.S. presidents. She volunteered at national wildlife refuges. ("Wonderful experiences," she said.)

After her husband died in 2006, Muriel returned home to Monmouth County. Muriel is the matriarch of a large family — four children (three living), nine grandchildren, and 13 great-grandchildren. At age 87, she continues to write a blog. Muriel also is an active member of several historical societies and the author of five books, mostly about local history.

And for the past 10 years or so, Muriel has been a Certified Volunteer Advocate (CVA), working to promote better care and better living for the residents of a nursing home in nearby Middletown.

Muriel got involved after a friend — who happened to be the original administrator of that nursing home — and his wife became residents of the place. When Muriel would visit, she was not happy with the state of the nursing home or the care her friend's wife received as she was dying. Muriel wanted to do something about it. So when she learned about the CVA program, she decided to get involved.

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.

Muriel was placed in the Middletown nursing home and has been visiting ever since, meeting with residents regularly and helping to resolve any issues they are facing.

Some successful changes she has promoted over the years might seem small but they are huge to many residents—for example, making it possible for Catholic residents to take communion.

Muriel has seen several administrators come and go, which can be a bad sign for quality care and services. For the past three years, Muriel said, the residents benefited from a

conscientious administrator who would respond immediately to any concerns she raised on their behalf. A new administrator recently was brought in, and Muriel is hopeful that the residents will remain in good hands. Meanwhile, she will stay vigilant as she enjoys her visits with the residents.

“I continue as an advocate purely for the satisfaction it gives me,” Muriel said. “I can certainly relate to residents because of age. And I know many of them since I've lived in the area so long.”

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