

‘The best volunteer opportunity... You make a difference in people’s lives’

When Neil Weisfeld was looking for post-retirement volunteer opportunities, he wanted something familiar, something aligned with his background and interests—but with a new twist.

For many years, he worked in public policy, mostly related to health care. It was a career that lent itself to observing how policies affect people’s lives from a 30,000-foot-altitude view. After retiring, Neil wanted a pursuit where he would see things from a more grounded, personal perspective. The Certified Volunteer Advocate (CVA) Program proved to be a great fit.

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.

Neil was assigned to a Princeton-area skilled nursing facility, and he still advocates for the residents there today, five and a half years later. The facility has 135 beds with separate units for rehabilitation, memory care, and more traditional long-term care.

His goal is to visit twice weekly. He tries to time his arrival around lunchtime, when a group of residents will be in the common dining area. Food is a great conversation starter and a frequent topic of concern for the residents.

Then, Neil will make the rounds, visiting residents in their rooms. He makes an effort to seek out new residents to introduce himself and let them know he is there to advocate for them.

Connecting with residents is crucial. “My style is, I try to use humor,” Neil said. “People like to laugh. They want to hear laughter. I think that is one thing that is lacking for a lot of nursing home residents.”

When Neil began advocating at the nursing home, it had issues. Turnover was high, and not just among the front-line staff. During Neil’s time, he has seen three owners, six different chief executives, and nine directors of nursing.

These days, however, greater stability has helped lead to better care and quality of living for the residents. Neil said it is satisfying when residents and others tell him that he had a hand in improving conditions at the nursing home.

“This is the best volunteer opportunity in New Jersey,” Neil said. “You can adopt your own style. You can make your own routine. You make a difference in people’s lives, and you get to see that difference. And every time I go in, people are glad to see me.”

###