

Advocate for Nursing Home Residents Follows in Her Mother's Footsteps

For Stephanie Kiziukiewicz, better known as Stevie, becoming a Certified Volunteer Advocate (CVA) to champion the rights and needs of nursing home residents seemed like a perfect fit.

Stevie needed an internship at the time to supplement her coursework at Stockton University, where she was earning a degree in Gerontology and Advocacy. The position would also pay tribute to Stevie's mother, a clinical public health nurse who retired in the 1960s and then became one of the original advocates for residents of skilled nursing facilities. "She was always an inspiration to me," Stevie said.

The timing was off, unfortunately. It was 2020. COVID-19 was still raging, and CVA visits to nursing homes were on hold. So Stevie took an internship with the Medicare Rights Center.

Stevie had enrolled at Stockton after retiring from a career as a respiratory pharmaceutical and device representative. The new degree, as well as specialized credentials she earned, enabled Stevie to launch a new career as a Board Certified Patient Advocate and Certified Dementia Practitioner.

Meanwhile, Stevie continued volunteering with the Medicare Rights Center, and she kept the CVA program in mind. She eventually signed up a little over a year ago.

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 with a nursing home near where they live. Each CVA receives ongoing guidance and support from a Regional Coordinator.

Stevie and her husband have lived in Seaside Park, Ocean County for many years. Their daughter, son-in-law, and two grandsons live in Bloomfield.

When she became a CVA, Stevie was placed with a nursing home in nearby Brick. The nursing home is part of a larger community that also includes rehabilitation services and areas for people experiencing memory loss, Alzheimer's, and related conditions.

Stevie visits regularly and makes her way from room to room, or bed to bed, talking with residents.

"I thoroughly enjoy my visits," Stevie said. "After a year, the residents interact with me and confide in me some of their concerns. I like seeing their smiles when I approach, and I know

that they know they can speak with me in private and in confidence about anything that is troubling them.”

Some of the more common concerns include the food, not getting help when they need it, and the use of agency staff. Stevie said the nursing home administrator is always willing to listen, and he takes the residents’ concerns seriously.

“It is most rewarding to help those who might not have anyone else in their lives to stand up for them or listen to them,” she said. “I have always been an advocate in one way or another throughout my life—following in my mother’s footsteps.”

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