

Volunteer Pays it Forward by Advocating for Nursing Home Residents

Thai-Phuong “Thai” Nguyen has been a Certified Volunteer Advocate (CVA) for nearly two decades, representing New Jersey’s Long-Term Care Ombudsman in fostering a better quality of life for residents of a nursing home in Parsippany.

The longtime Morris County resident keeps a full schedule of volunteer activities: tax preparation and counseling services for older adults and low- to moderate-income families; Medicare counseling; financial literacy coaching for people in transitional housing, residential treatment, and shelters for battered women and the unhoused; and companionship and advocacy for individuals in hospice care.

Thai sees volunteering as a way to help people while repaying her gratitude for a life she was able to make for herself in the United States. She sought refuge here as a teenager at the end of the Vietnam War. She could not speak English, and she had no money or family in the area.

Thanks to the assistance she received from the federal government and her community, Thai thrived in her new home. She graduated from Rutgers University with a bachelor’s degree in Finance and Management and then worked more than 20 years in the manufacturing industry. Thai was a personal banker for another 10 years before retiring in 2013.

Her tenure as a CVA began long before her retirement—in 2004, to be exact. 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 solo assignments visiting nursing homes near where they live. Each CVA receives ongoing guidance and support from a Regional Coordinator.

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Thai said she first reached out to the LTCO in May 2004, responding to an ad about the need for volunteers. She was placed in her current nursing home in July of that year.

A big part of being a CVA is observing residents and listening, she said, especially when they voice concerns or complaints that Thai needs to follow up on and resolve with the nursing home staff. On other visits, she might participate in activities with the residents and get a chance to hear their stories.

"I have made many friends and learned from their lives and their achievements," Thai said. "Many residents don't have family members and friends who visit them. I like to bring smiles to their faces when I visit and talk to them."

Thai said one of her favorite moments as a CVA was helping to ensure that residents could return to eating together in the communal dining room after months and months of being isolated in their rooms during the COVID-19 emergency.

"Being a volunteer advocate for the Long-Term Care Ombudsman is very rewarding," Thai said. "You can be a strong voice to protect the residents, bring love and friendship to them, and make a difference for each individual."

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