

‘This Could Be Done Better.’ — Healthcare Professional’s Eye for Quality Helps Nursing Home Residents

For Wendy Sowa-Maldarelli, a healthcare professional with a keen eye for quality-of-care and quality-of-life concerns, nursing homes seemed like places where the residents could use someone looking out for them.

“Who hasn’t visited such a facility without coming away thinking, ‘This could be done better’?” she asked. On top of that, she realized, residents may be unaware of their rights or may not be in a position to easily verbalize concerns.

So Wendy was intrigued when she heard a radio ad seeking Certified Volunteer Advocates (CVAs) to visit nursing homes and support the residents.

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.

After becoming a CVA, Wendy was placed with a nursing home near her home in Bergen County. A sonographer working in cardio-oncology, Wendy is a Fellow of the American Society of Echocardiography. She also holds a master’s degree in healthcare management.

Wendy said her professional experience—which includes clinical, research, educational, and regulatory duties—helped prepare her for the CVA role. She knows how quality care and a positive resident experience *should* look, so she is able to pick up on times when reality is falling short.

A typical visit begins with Wendy checking in with residents and addressing immediate needs — finding a staff member to bring the resident some water, for example, or warm a meal that has gone cold. She will also listen to residents’ concerns about ongoing issues such as call bells going unanswered, the level of care, and staff members not paying enough attention to maintaining the residents’ hygiene.

During her time visiting the nursing home, Wendy has been involved in several improvements, including efforts to ensure that residents who need physical therapy receive it in a timely manner, oxygen tanks are kept full and operable, and staff members safely use Hoyer lifts to help non-ambulatory residents out of their beds. The facility also now guarantees that all

residents receive communication in their language of choice, which is among the resident rights guaranteed by state and federal law.

Wendy emphasized that these wins for the residents are the result of teamwork that began with building a good working relationship with the facility staff and seeking support from her Regional Coordinator and others within the LTCO.

CVAs make a crucial difference when they stand up for the residents, Wendy said.

“Some of the residents are lonely, with few to no visitors,” Wendy said. “Meeting with them regularly in their home gives them solace and hope. Others may not voice concerns out of fear of retribution or retaliation. We can speak for the residents, with their permission, to enhance their lives in many ways.”

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