Volunteers help long-term care residents stay in control of their lives

by Dee Riggs | Jan. 29, 2015, 10:07 a.m. | Comment

World photo/Don Seabrook
Char Tate, left, speaks with Regency Manor resident Geraldine Brooks Wednesday at Brooks' room. Tate volunteers to meet with vulnerable adults to help solve problems they may have.

RELATED STORY

How to volunteer
What: Washington State Long-term Care Ombuds Program
Read related story →

CHELAN — To many, the problems may seem minor.

Coffee isn't always available.
Food isn't served hot enough
A roommate is too noisy.
Shaving is mandatory.

"I got called in to one situation where a woman was being required to have her facial hair shaved," said Char Tate of Chelan. "She felt offended because that was not what she wanted. After we talked, and the staff talked, she agreed to have it done but there is a big difference between being told you will have this done, and, "Would you like to have this done?""
Tate is a volunteer, working for the state Long-term Care Ombuds Program.

Seventeen volunteers cover six counties — Chelan, Douglas, Grant, Okanogan, Lincoln and Adams — focusing on the rights of residents in long-term care facilities. The program is funded by state and federal funds. Aging & Adult Care of Central Washington contracts with the state program to provide ombuds.

“If you can do something at home, you should be able to do it in a long-term care facility,” said Ken Sterner, assistant regional long-term care ombuds. “If you want to get up late in the morning, you should be able to do that. If you want a cup of coffee in the morning, if you want to watch a TV show.

“The perception is that, in a long-term care facility, our lives become regimented, and that’s not the way it should be.”

Volunteers talk with residents and find out their concerns, Sterner said. They will only talk to facility administrators, staff or family members if the resident approves. Otherwise, the volunteer is just there to listen and offer advice or suggestions.

“Our conversations can be about how the family is doing, to how the Seahawks are doing,” Sterner said. “We are like friendly visitors. We are just looking for residents who have concerns and need to know how to express them.”

Sterner said many concerns are about food, which can be a big issue because mealtimes become very important to people who don’t get out much.

“Their world can get very small so that even the smallest things become very important,” he said.

Tate, 67 and a retired teacher, volunteers at Regency Manor, Heritage Heights and an adult family home, all in Chelan. She has done this for five years.

“I just go in and hug them,” she says of the residents. “I am very much a person who loves to talk and I ask if they have any concerns.”

She agreed that food is a big area of concern but she has also dealt with roommate problems. One person was upset that his roommate was loud and obnoxious,” Tate said. “I think he ended up changing roommates.”

Tate also found it helpful to tell a woman that she could change her power of attorney. This was after a relative of the woman, who was getting bank statements, refused to let the woman see them.

“It made me feel very satisfied,” Tate said. “and I think she felt very good that she was in control.”

Several issues have involved what Tate calls personal dignity. One case was a woman who felt insulted that staff insisted on shaving her facial hair. The woman needed an outlet to talk about feeling forced to do it, when she felt it was not necessary.

“One of the biggest things that I see is a loss of control, and it’s awful” Tate said.

She has also solved problems relating to lost clothing and glasses in a facility, and has let residents know that they are entitled to look at their medical records, and that they can say “slow down” to a physical therapist who, they think, is working them too hard.

Fred Hall, 89, and a retired veterinarian, has been a volunteer for the program for 10 years. He visits at Blossom Creek, Columbia Heights and Blossom Valley in Wenatchee.

“Most people don’t want to be known as a complainer so you have to fish a little bit,” he said.
Among his success stories are helping some residents get new sheets when theirs were lost in the laundry, and helping family members who had concerns over resident relationships.

Both Hall and Tate say their volunteer time is fulfilling. "I enjoy it," Tate said. "I enjoy talking to the people and finding out what their lives were like, and giving them an opportunity to know somebody is there to talk to them. "There are a lot of people in these facilities who no one comes up to talk to. I think that what I hope to do as an ombudsman is to give people an opportunity to feel they are in control of their own life."

Reach Dee Riggs at 509-664-7147 or deerriggs@wenatcheeworld.com.