

Long Term Care Ombudsman Program Serving Elders of Color - By Rose Floyd

“I’m glad you’re Black! I’m glad I’m Black too.” I shared this warm greeting of recognition and comfort with a 74 year old African American woman at the door of her apartment in an assisted-living facility. Grace, *not her real name*, had called the King County Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program (KCLTCOP) for help. She was very upset, telling me that, “a stranger is paying my bills. I want my niece to take care of my business”.

The Washington State Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program, as mandated by the Federal Older American’s Act, is intended to improve the quality of life of people living in licensed long-term care facilities. Residents are guaranteed certain rights by federal and state laws and regulations. The purpose of the program is to protect and promote these rights and assist in empowering residents to become self-advocates.

The regulations and rights that long-term care ombudsmen work most in ensuring are the long-term care resident rights outlined in the Revised Code of Washington, Chapter 70.129.005. The legislative intent states in part that, ... “choice, participation, privacy, and the opportunity to engage in religious, political, civic, recreational and other social activities foster a sense of self-worth and enhance the quality of life for long-term care residents”.

Living out the intent of these rights are as unique as the individual and their communities. Grace’s greeting expressed a common care need: the need to have concerns received, acknowledged and acted on by a person who shares or cares about your culture. This is most easily understood when the issues are language or food.

The care needs can be different for African American elders. Those elders who are most able to successfully create a satisfying home-like environment in long-term care have informal resources that supplement the care provided by the home. Family, friends, neighbors or church members become informal caregivers who help to communicate, reinforce, enhance and monitor the elder’s care. This support system can also become more skilled and familiar with the accommodations that the home is required to make in allowing the elder to enjoy some of the things that were typical prior to living in a long-term care; such as maintaining connections to the community, food preferences and choice in how care is received.

Elders and their informal caregivers who are willing and able to work with advocates within the facility; like the ombudsman program are often provided more options to enhance care and resolve problems. Learning about the care setting, developing an approach for effective communication, partnering and problem solving is essential to receiving good care.

Grace was very troubled by the transition from her home, to the hospital and now to her new home in assisted-living that she no longer had control over her finances. The LTC Ombudsman Program was able to assist Grace with her concerns and now her niece is assisting to manage her finances.

For more information on resident rights and ombudsman services contact the KCLTCOP at (206) 623-0816 or email ltcop@solid-ground.org.