



Meet Our Volunteer

Meet Lydia

Lydia is a Volunteer Long-Term Care Ombudsman who has served residents of nursing and assisted living facilities in Harris County (Houston area) for over four years.

Why did you decide to volunteer with the Ombudsman Program?

Lydia, Volunteer Ombudsman



In the process of researching rehabilitation facilities for a relative, I came across the Long-Term Care (LTC) Ombudsman Program on the Texas Attorney General's website. As a disabled disability justice activist and someone who needs assistance with activities of daily living (ADLs), who is at risk of institutionalization, I was of course, interested in the program. Simply put, justice for disabled people appeals to me. Our society continues to

commit human rights violations against older and disabled people that devalue our lives. It was also a good fit for me because I have a degree in social work.

What is your first memory of serving residents as an ombudsman?

When I first introduced myself to residents, they thought I was a new resident. They were intrigued that a person in a powerchair was their new ombudsman. Initially they were curious about why I was in a powerchair.



The Office of the State Long-Term Care Ombudsman is independent within the Texas Health and Human Services system.

I remember one woman saying, "You're like us." And I said yes. I need help with stuff, too. What struck me was the loneliness of so many of the residents and, unfortunately, the demeaning manner in which the staff spoke to them. I was taken aback by this.

Describe a time you helped a resident.

I worked for over six months with the help of a congressman to assist a Vietnam Veteran straighten out his social security and VA benefit issues so he would not be involuntarily discharged. The facility told the man that he needed to straighten out his SSDI, but they didn't offer much in the way of help. He had just undergone surgery and was in pain, so navigating complex bureaucratic systems was overwhelming. We successfully fought the discharge. This angered me. There were insurmountable obstacles in every direction, and of course, these barriers make you realize that the problems are systemic. However, I was determined to help this man in one way or another. I will never forget him. My advocacy outside of my ombudsman work centers on these deeply entrenched systemic issues and, to be cliché, speaking truth to power, which generally doesn't go over well with power, right?

What impact do you as an ombudsman have on residents' lives?

I am not sure; I bear witness for them. I sit by bedsides and hold their hands as they cry. I listen to them and let them know that I believe them. Too often the testimonies of people in nursing homes are dismissed or disregarded. This harms a person's sense of worth and causes people to feel socially alienated or feel that they have experienced social death. It is an insidious form of ableism and injustice; one that is exploited to avoid accountability.

Describe a time when a resident had a positive impact on you.

It is impactful knowing how they look forward to seeing me. Once when I was sick, they called to check on me. They were worried. I also enjoy hearing about their lives. One man told me of his experiences during the Cuban revolution. I feel privileged to hear historical perspectives directly from the people who were witness to the events.

What is something you've learned while serving as an ombudsman?

Oh wow, I have learned so much. I do my homework. I try to know the industry and regulations inside out. There is so much to know, and it changes. Rarely do I miss federal and state congressional hearings, and I read the testimonies. I keep up with the industry's narratives and publications, you name it. Nursing home advocacy is now central to my activism. As a result of this, I am now working with other advocacy groups on the issue.

Knowing what you know as an ombudsman, do you have any advice for the public about long-term care?

We have a human rights crisis occurring in our nation's long-term congregate facilities. There is no sugarcoating it. Substantive change will not happen without upsetting those who benefit from our current system. I implore people to get involved; to get in the driver's seat. Either you or a loved one will need long-term supports and services at some point. Meaningful change requires all of us not only to care a whole lot, but to act, right? Apathy and hoping that someone else will change it for us just isn't going to happen.

Do you have any advice to share about weathering difficult times?

More is required than superficial and isolated fixes that will need to be repeated ad nauseum decade after decade. A transformation in our narrative and practices about aging and disability is required. For me this is about humanizing disabled and older people. I keep my eyes on the prize as this is a civil rights issue. Of course, it isn't going to be easy.

When you're not volunteering as an ombudsman, what else do you like to do?

Most of my life is centered on disability justice, but I am an avid reader of philosophy. I also sew, crochet, and get into good trouble.

Is there anything else you would like to share?

We need more disabled ombudsmen or those who understand disability rights.

For More Information About Volunteering

Email or call Pat Borgfeldt, Ombudsman Developer, Office of the State Long-Term Care Ombudsman, Pat.Borgfeldt@hhs.texas.gov or (512) 438-2545.