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Office of the State Long-Term Care Ombudsman Monthly Report

The Office of the State Long-Term Care Ombudsman (OSLTCO) is a state office that provides advocacy for Iowans living in long-term care settings. The OSLTCO is mandated by the Older Americans Act. Each state is required to have an OSLTCO; however, each state OSLTCO operates in a different manner. The OSLTCO reports activity on a federal year basis from October 1 to September 30.

The OSLTCO is beginning a monthly report that will be made available to stakeholders and other interested parties. The purpose of the report is to provide monthly snapshots of activities of this Office. This first report includes an introduction to the office and information about a couple of the major issues the local long-term care ombudsman (LLTCO) have been addressing - restrictions on visits to and care concerns of residents/tenants of long-term care.

In Iowa, the OSLTCO includes the State Long-Term Care Ombudsman, LLTCO program, the Volunteer Ombudsman Program (VOP), an Empowerment Specialist and the Managed Care Ombudsman Program. The Office advocates for Iowans who live in nursing and residential care facilities and assisted living programs.

Each LLTCO provides direct advocacy to Iowans living in long-term care by looking into complaints made by or on behalf of residents and tenants. At the direction and permission of the resident/tenant, LLTCOs work toward the desired complaint resolution. The LLTCO program is staffed by six LLTCOs who work in either the northern or southern district of the state.

The Volunteer Ombudsman Program is staffed by a volunteer coordinator and 52 volunteers and interim volunteers. Volunteer Ombudsman also provide direct advocacy to Iowans living in nursing facilities by looking into complaints made by or on behalf of residents. With resident permission, volunteer ombudsman work to get the resident's desired outcome to a complaint. Volunteer Ombudsman are assigned to a single facility and are required to be in the facility at least three hours per month during the time when there is not a public health emergency declaration.

The OSLTCO is establishing an empowerment specialist program that will allow for self-directed advocacy by residents and tenants. The Empowerment Specialist works to equip residents and tenants of Iowa's long-term care facilities with the skills needed to establish resident councils in facilities. Resident councils are recognized in the Older Americans Act as a mechanism for residents to improve the quality of life in long-term care facilities via self-directed advocacy. The Empowerment Specialist will work directly with residents and tenants wishing to establish resident councils and also work to educate facility administration in understanding their obligations to work to resolve issues brought to their attention from the resident councils.

The OSLTCO also houses the Managed Care Ombudsman Program (MCOP). While not recognized under the Older Americans Act, the Managed Care Ombudsman advocate for managed care members who reside in a long-term care facility or who receive services under one of the home and community based waivers. The MCOP separately publishes a monthly report on the activity of that program.

This month's report provides an opportunity to learn a bit more about the LLTCO for the southern district of Iowa.

Kim Cooper is a LLTCO in the southern district. Kim has worked in the aging field for 30 years and has been with the OSLTCO since 2006. She lives in Bettendorf and enjoys spending time with her nieces and nephew, and her mother who lives with her. Her hobbies are gardening, cooking, and riding her motorcycle. She also enjoys watching football and her favorite team is the Green Bay Packers.

Julie Pollock is also a LLTCO in the southern district. Julie and her husband, Dave, live in Anita where they are active in their community. Julie enjoys travelling to Chicago and Seattle to visit her daughters and loves being "Grandma" to Jack, age 9, and Clare, age 7. She has always had an interest in assisting Older Iowans as she worked as a Social Worker in long-term care facilities for 25 years before becoming a LLTCO in 2006.

Pam Railsback is the mobile LLTCO in the southern district. Pam Railsback has worked in the long-term care industry since college and absolutely loves helping the residents. She has been with the OSLTCO since 2007. Pam keeps busy volunteering as a cub scouts leader and PTO president at her son's school. She enjoys spending time running, swimming, doing DIY projects, traveling and ATV trail riding in their side-by-side ATV with her husband and son. She also enjoys snuggles with her Great Dane and Lab (who loves riding in the front seat of the ATV)!

COVID-19 has greatly impacted the population the OSLTCO serves. In March, it became apparent that Iowa would not be spared from COVID-19, as the first cases began to be reported in southeastern Iowa. In their efforts to prevent COVID-19 from entering the building, the staff of long-term care facilities in Iowa began to take measures in March of 2020 to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. These actions resulted in residents being confined to their rooms or cohorted to another part of the facility, unable to participate in group activities and enjoy communal dining. CMS guidance to long-term care facilities restricted most outside visitors and LLTCO staff from entering the facility. As the Office of the State Long-Term Care Ombudsman already provided a portion of their advocacy services via telephone and technology, the LLTCOs have been able to continue advocacy for residents/tenants of long-term care without missing a beat. Volunteer Ombudsmen have continued to provide remote advocacy services as requested by residents.

The OSLTCO has received many calls from frustrated residents and their loved ones about the visitation restrictions that have been imposed by long-term care facilities. In October alone, in excess of 50 contacts were made with the OSLTCO about the visitation restrictions that were prohibiting residents from connecting with their loved ones in the community. Concerns raised by those contacting the OSLTCO ranged from facilities refusing compassionate care visits, interfering with end of life visits, to facilities' refusal to facilitate virtual visitation, and facilities' refusal to allow window visits. LLTCOs are working with families, facilities and residents/tenants to resolve these issues.

In addition the LLTCO, with the permission of the resident/tenant, have been advocating regarding various issues related to care in the facilities. This advocacy has included requests for assistance with pain management, call light response times from staff, personal hygiene issues and requests for assistance in obtaining assistive devices or equipment. In October, residents/tenants, family members, friends or legal representatives contacted this Office more than 25 times to request assistance with care issues.

In January, data will be provided on activities of the LLTCO program for complaints, actions and resolution for the first quarter of federal fiscal year 2021. Thereafter the data will be provided monthly.