



ANNUAL REPORT

STATE LONG-TERM CARE OMBUDSMAN

2024 *FEDERAL FISCAL YEAR*



**State Long-Term Care
Ombudsman**



Dear Fellow Ohioans,

It is my sincere honor and privilege to serve as your State Long-Term Care Ombudsman. Every day, I see both the needs of Ohioans receiving long-term care services and the commitment that goes into ensuring their voices are heard and their rights respected throughout the state by Ohio's long-term care Ombudsmen. My simple goal is to ensure that Ohio has the most capable, effective and client-centered ombudsman program in the nation.

This work has one focus: ensuring the rights of Ohioans receiving long-term care services are honored. Ombudsmen build relationships with individuals based on a foundation of trust and respect and by truly listening to their concerns and goals. With that, we elevate their collective voices into systems change, empower them with the necessary information to advocate on their own behalf, and educate long-term care service providers and members of the community. We also work to resolve concerns, and drive legislation on the state and national level that reinforces rights in an ever-changing landscape.

Our work is always done during incredible change—both for the individuals we serve and those working to provide quality care across our communities. This year we celebrated the enhancements in our program regulations in the Older Americans Act and most notably, in our capacity to serve Ohioans driven by the exceptional work of the Governor's Nursing Home Quality and Accountability Task Force.

The advancements made in our program design, and those set for next year, will ensure that the needs of those we serve will be elevated and articulated in the most impactful way possible for the years to come.

With heartfelt gratitude,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Leilani Pelletier". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end.

Leilani Pelletier
State of Ohio Long-Term Care Ombudsman

ABOUT THE
LONG-TERM CARE
OMBUDSMAN

ABOUT THE Long-Term Care Ombudsman

Established federally by the Older Americans Act in 1978 (45 CFR 1324) and in Ohio by sections 173.14-28 of the Ohio Revised Code, the Long-Term Care Ombudsman program is made up of a state office with dedicated staff employed by the Ohio Department of Aging (AGE) and twelve regional offices throughout Ohio with more than 100 paid staff and nearly 200 volunteers. Through this vast network of dedicated advocates, we support over 192,000 Ohioans receiving long-term care services and support.

Residents of nursing homes and assisted living facilities have 36 rights codified in the Ohio Revised Code (ORC 3721.13), including the rights to a clean and safe environment, to be treated with dignity and respect, and to be free from abuse, neglect, and exploitation. Those living in Residential Facilities Class 2s and other settings have similar rights protected by law. We serve this vulnerable population by educating residents of their rights, empowering residents to speak up for their quality of care and needs, and advocating on behalf of residents who need someone to voice and resolve their concerns.



My brother had to go to a nursing facility for care. Many things came up in that situation. [The Ombudsmen] were both very kind, supportive, and patient with my brother and informative to me. The support really took a lot of worry and question off my mind. Thank you for making this situation as easy as possible.

Regional Ombudsman Programs



1 REGION 1
Pro Seniors, Inc.
1-800-488-6070

2 REGION 2
**Joint Office of
Citizens Complaints**
1-800-395-8267

3 REGION 3
**Advocates for Basic
Legal Equality, Inc.**
1-800-542-1874

4 REGION 4
**Advocates for Basic
Legal Equality, Inc.**
1-800-542-1874

5 REGION 5
**Ohio District 5 Area
Agency on Aging**
1-800-860-5799

6 REGION 6
**Easter Seals of Cen-
tral & Southeast Ohio**
1-800-536-5891

7 REGION 7
**Area Agency on
Aging District 7, Inc.**
1-800-488-6070

8 REGION 8
**Easter Seals of
Central &
Southeast Ohio**
1-800-395-8267

9 REGION 9
**Direction Home
Akron Canton Area
Agency on Aging &
Disabilities**
1-800-542-1874

10A REGION 10A
**Long-Term Care
Ombudsman of
Cleveland**
1-800-542-1874

10B REGION 10B
**Direction Home
Akron Canton Area
Agency on Aging
and Disabilities**
1-800-860-5799

11 REGION 11
**Direction Home
of Eastern Ohio**
1-800-860-5799

PROGRAM ACTIVITY HIGHLIGHTS

Program Activity Highlights

Nursing Home Quality and Accountability Task Force

During his 2023 State of the State Address, Governor Mike DeWine announced his plan to form a task force aimed at improving care and quality of life in Ohio's nursing homes. The plan was formalized with Executive Order 2023-06D, which officially created the Ohio Governor's Nursing Home Quality and Accountability Task Force. The group was made up of experts in aging, long-term care, and advocates, including Ohio's Long-Term Care Ombudsman.

Over six weeks, the task force conducted 11 regional listening sessions across seven cities to gather input directly from residents and their families. Their findings led to nearly two dozen actionable recommendations, resulting in a historic package of investments and policy reforms. These changes are aimed at setting a high standard for every nursing home in Ohio.

One of the key recommendations was to enhance and expand Ohio's Long-Term Care Ombudsman program, aiming for greater support and advocacy for residents throughout the state. In February 2024, AGE announced \$2.3 million in funding to support regional Ombudsman programs. These funds support the recruitment and retention of Ombudsmen, improving technology, and increasing the ability of Ombudsmen to visit nursing homes and respond to complaints.

Ombudsman Program Expansion

Program expansion following the recommendations of the Nursing Home Quality and Accountability Task Force has led to significant enhancements across Ohio's long-term care support network. To ensure consistency across the State, newly formed positions included six regional liaisons whose work is to identify and support needs of Ohioans across the state.

These liaisons play a vital role in ensuring that important updates, needs, and concerns are addressed with the full force of resources both local and state, facilitating a strong alignment to help shape statewide policies and local needs. This improvement helps create a more coordinated approach to addressing issues in nursing homes and other care settings, making advocacy efforts more effective.

Additionally, the expansion has allowed for a greater emphasis on raising awareness of the resources available to residents and their families. This has been achieved through increased efforts on awareness activities, ensuring that more people know about their rights and how the Ombudsman program can assist them. Through targeted campaigns and outreach, these efforts are designed to empower families and residents with knowledge about how to seek help and ensure quality care.



VOLUNTEER HIGHLIGHTS

Volunteer Highlights

Ombudsman volunteers share two key qualities: a deep connection to service and a commitment to ensuring that everyone in long-term care enjoys a fulfilling life. Alongside their staff teammates, volunteers across Ohio work tirelessly to advocate for, empower, and educate these valued members of our community. We couldn't achieve our mission without them.

Volunteers undergo at least 36 hours of initial training and are certified to assist with resident concerns, emergency facility closures, and facility visits, enabling staff to focus on complex cases that demand extra time. Their dedication greatly expands the reach of the ombudsman program, ensuring more residents receive the support they need. Across Ohio's twelve regional Ombudsman programs, volunteers have a tremendous impact and play a vital role in advancing our shared mission.

Partnering with Universities to Build a Future

Regional volunteer recruitment efforts often involve partnering with local universities to offer internship opportunities for students studying fields such as gerontology, social work, public health, and family and consumer sciences. These internships provide students with invaluable real-world experience, while supporting our cause. Universities with ombudsman interns include:

Bowling Green University, Kent State University, Kent State University (Tuscarawas Campus), Miami University, Mount Vernon Nazarene University, Muskingum University, Ohio University (Zanesville Campus), Ohio State University (Mansfield Campus), Shawnee State University, Stark State College, Tiffin University, University of Akron, University of Cincinnati, Xavier University, Youngstown State University, Zane State College

**220****VOLUNTEER OMBUDSMEN****9,843****HOURS DEDICATED****3,684****RESIDENTS SUPPORTED**

Volunteer Stories

Supporting Emergency Transfers

Susan quickly visited five residents transferred to her assigned nursing home facility after an evacuation. Her visits ensured their needs were met, allowing staff to focus on other urgent matters.

Alerting Staff to Change in Ownership

Beverly informed staff about a change in ownership at her assigned assisted living facility. Her regular visits helped the Ombudsman team address transition issues and support resident care.

Resident Council Participation

Maggie learned about a resident's unmet care needs at a Resident Council meeting. She worked with staff to address the issues and followed up with residents, noting resident needs were addressed promptly.

PROGRAM ANALYSIS

Program Analysis

Successes in Providing Services to Residents of Long-Term Care Facilities

Increasing Focus on Awareness

The Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program placed particular emphasis on expanding awareness of the program to the general public, as well as professionals in the aging network with a shared commitment to protecting residents' rights.

Through focused efforts, we laid the foundation for a unified branding among all regional programs, delivering consistent messaging about Ombudsman services, and an updated communications strategy. We also updated web-based resources and expanded our presence in social media and print communications. Ultimately, increased awareness of the program ensures that more people, especially those best positioned to identify residents' needs, understand our services and know how to connect with us.

Reaching and Advocating for Potentially Isolated Residents

While Ombudsmen routinely serve residents across all stages of care, specialized efforts were designed and implemented to reach potentially isolated residents who may be in greater need of advocacy services.

Efforts to reach these individuals included statewide training for all ombudsmen on signs of potential isolation and instituting a standardized approach to screen for the presence of potentially isolated residents during advocacy visits.



Program Analysis

Identified Barriers and Challenges

Ensuring Continuity Across Care Settings

The ever-evolving landscape of long-term care services and supports in Ohio presents challenges in ensuring residents' rights, particularly identifying and securing access to the least restrictive environment in which residents' care needs can be met. Addressing these issues requires systemic solutions, including stronger enforcement and clearer pathways for residents to exercise their rights.

Managing Facility Closures and Service Disruptions

Facility closures, or potential closures, create logistical challenges for residents and advocates alike. In non-emergency situations, proper notification to residents regarding pending closures or service disruptions requires extensive monitoring and planning, with multiple facilities avoiding closure at the last minute.

While this may result in the best scenario for residents, it also redirects program resources to a responsive posture rather than a proactive one.

Navigating Technological Barriers

Face-to-face interaction remains crucial and a foundation of the Ombudsman program's ability to offer residents confidential and secure advocacy — a tenant of the Ombudsman's unique role in long-term care.

Although society increasingly relies on technology where face-to-face communication was once prominent, residents' often lack equal access to such technology. This gap can hinder communication, especially during transitions between care settings, and requires ongoing creativity from Ombudsman to ensure residents remain informed and connected.



PROGRAM DATA

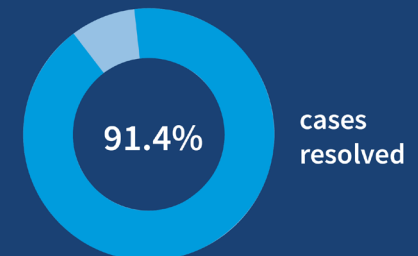
Program Data

Notable Datapoints

We use the data we collect to shape future visits and guide providers on areas for improvement. Behind every number is a person with a unique story, and we must support each person with care and compassion.

- The Ombudsman program provided 12% more assistance through calls, visits, resident council participation, and client cases, compared to the previous fiscal year.
- The Ombudsman program participated in 3,832 surveys statewide, engaging with the Ohio Department of Health on the complaint and annual survey process.
- Ombudsmen supported over 3,000 individuals receiving Home and Community-Based Services (HCBS) and over 1,000 MyCare Ohio beneficiaries with their Long-Term Care (LTC) needs.
- In FFY24, in-person advocacy visits to facilities increased by 21%, with Ombudsmen speaking directly to residents about care and living conditions.

Ombudsman Program Highlights:

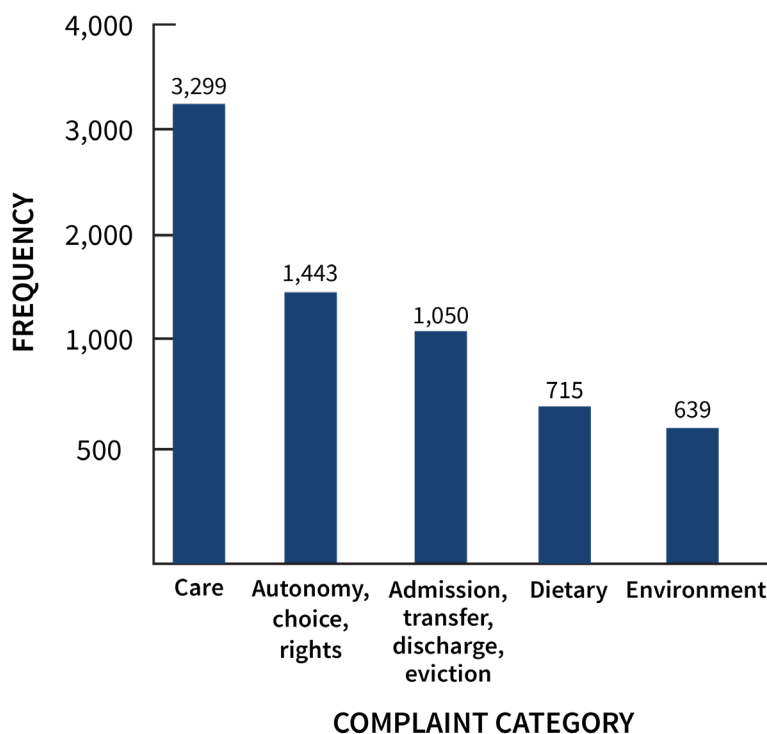


9,718 complaints investigated

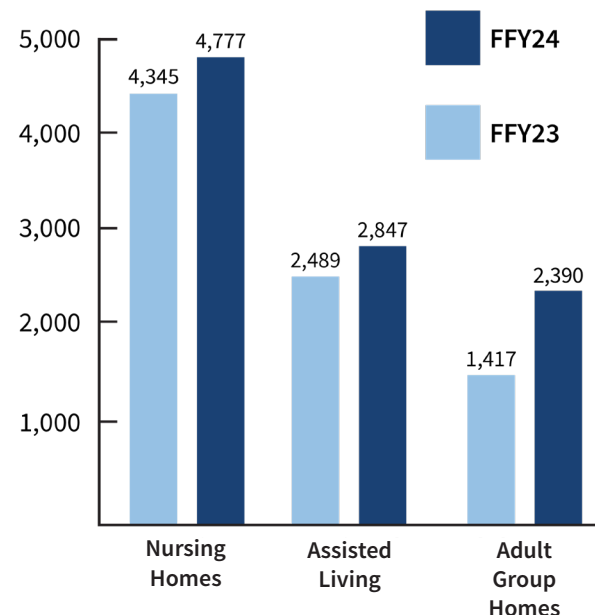
74,942 individuals supported

246 community outreach events

Top Complaint Categories Investigated in FFY24



Visits to LTC Settings in FFY23 & FFY24



EVALUATION
AND POLICY
RECOMMENDATIONS

Evaluation and Policy Recommendations

Systemic improvements to the quality of care can ensure that residents receive the respect, support, and dignity they deserve. One of the key roles of the state office is to provide policy recommendations in support of long-term care residents. We encourage residents and families to stay informed and to engage with local legislators.

Improper discharges related complaints remained the most common individual complaint at 9.3%, but is down it's most recent high in 2018 of 11%.

Priority Areas Identified Through Complaints

An evaluation of complaints by residents identifies a need to focus on the fundamentals of safety (discharge), basic physical needs (hygiene and medications) and resident self determination (Dignity and respect).



Evaluation and Policy Recommendations

Increase Medicaid Residents' Personal Needs Allowance

Residents who use Medicaid to pay for long-term care must contribute any income they receive, such as Old-Age, Survivors, and Disability Insurance (OASDI) or pension, to the provider, with Medicaid covering the remaining balance. These residents receive a \$50 per month personal needs allowance (PNA) to spend as they wish, which, for example, can be used for snacks, new clothing, favorite toiletries, a birthday card for a loved one, or even to pay for cable TV/WIFI or a haircut.

The PNA last increased in Ohio in September 2015, from \$40 to \$50 per month. The Long-Term Care Ombudsman office advocates for increasing the monthly allowance to at least \$75, reviewed annually, and increased appropriately.

Esther's Law Expansion

Enacted in 2022, Esther's Law allows nursing home residents to have a camera in their room as an added measure of safety and comfort. The law has proven effective, providing video evidence in cases of neglect and violations of dignity and respect.

The Ombudsman program advocates for expanding the law to include Residential Care Facilities (RCFs, also known as Assisted Living), where many residents live with dementia and other cognitive impairments.

Additionally, we support making the cost of camera installation and WIFI access free or at a nominal fee, ensuring that Medicaid residents can also benefit from the right to have a camera.



NAVIGATING
RESIDENTS' RIGHTS
AND CARE

Navigating Residents' Rights and Care

How the Ombudsman Program Guided a Resident Through Uncertain Times

A provider closure can be a stressful time for residents of long-term care; it often means leaving behind a place they call home and facing uncertainty in a new environment, where they must depend on the care and trust of new people. It is for this reason that residents are afforded certain rights regarding transfer and discharge which guarantee they are transferred in a safe and prompt manner, with their belongings, medications, and records.

When a Southern Ohio nursing home announced it would be closing its doors, residents were given a 90-day notice to find new homes. However, with staff leaving in search of new employment and the owners halting food orders and shutting down utilities, the situation began unraveling much faster than expected.

One resident was especially impacted: he had no family in Ohio and was also battling cancer, requiring intravenous (IV) chemotherapy — causing numerous nursing homes to decline him for transfer.

Even when he was the last remaining resident, the Ombudsman program continued to serve as his advocate, making certain that he continued to receive quality care, had access to food and services, and, most importantly, that he was treated with dignity and respect through every step of the process.

After finally securing a place in a new nursing home and moving in, the resident faced a new challenge. His insurance had stopped covering IV chemotherapy, resulting in the facility placing a 30-day involuntary discharge notice.

Facing an impossible choice — stop his chemotherapy to stay in his new home or continue treatment but undergo another transfer — he reached out to the Ombudsman program.

The resident was immediately connected with an Ombudsman who began advocating on his behalf with the nursing home administration and also understood the complexities of managing his Medicare and Medicaid benefits. With the assistance of the Ombudsman, the resident was able to switch to a health plan that covered his treatment, allowing him to stay at the facility without sacrificing his care.

A year later, the Ombudsman received an update: the resident's cancer was in remission and he was now living in Pennsylvania with his family. This story is a reminder of how even in the most challenging of circumstances, an Ombudsman can make a difference in the lives of long-term care residents, providing advocacy and education with a focus on making dignity and quality care a priority.

Residents of long-term care have the right to:

- Be Fully Informed
- Air Grievances
- Participate in One's Own Care
- Privacy and Confidentiality
- A safe, Informed Transfer & Discharge
- Be Treated with Dignity and Respect
- Receive Visits
- Make Independent Choices

**30 E Broad St, 22nd Floor
Columbus, OH 43215**

Ombudsman.Ohio.gov

1-800-282-1206



**State Long-Term Care
Ombudsman**

An independent office with generous support from the Ohio Department of Aging