

Testimony of
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Iowa Department of Elder Affairs

My name is Debi Meyers, and I am the Interim State Long Term Care Ombudsman in Iowa. I am here today representing the Iowa Resident Advocate Committee Program -- a unique program of 3,500 volunteers who are committed to safeguarding and improving the lives of our nursing facility residents. Every long term care facility in Iowa is required to have a Resident Advocate Committee comprised of volunteers from the community. The program is under the direction of the State Long Term Care Ombudsman in partnership with the Area Agencies on Aging.

Resident advocates are responsible for getting to know each resident assigned to them so that residents feel comfortable talking to the advocate about life at the facility and any concerns they may have. These volunteers are expected to visit the facility frequently at different times of the day and different days of the week. Because they are in their facility on an on-going basis, they are the first line of the state's advocacy efforts. They are the ones who are most keenly aware of how an individual facility operates, and can most immediately intervene on a resident's behalf.

We have not yet seen much impact in Iowa from the Nursing Home Initiatives. Our survey agency began off-hour surveys in February, and incorporated Quality Indicators in August. Guidance was recently issued to facilities to define under what circumstances per instance CMPs would be imposed. The investigation of abuse allegations within 10-days requires additional funding which would not be available until July of next year at the earliest.

While we are waiting for further enforcement changes to unfold, there are some components of the Initiative that are affording us an unanticipated opportunity to enhance the advocacy work of our volunteers. One of these areas relates to strengthening the tie between local advocacy, and state and federal efforts. A dilemma in managing a volunteer program of this size is the difficulty in instilling a sense of connection between the individual volunteers and broader public policy initiatives. Volunteers can easily feel detached from what's happening in Washington or in the state capitol because it is not a daily reality for them.

The new federal initiative related to nutrition and hydration provides us a way to link directly to the work of the local volunteers. As part of our on-going volunteers training, we are creating training modules around hydration and nutrition that will help volunteers understand the critical importance of these two issues and how their work can dovetail with that of the state survey agency. The advocates will learn in more detail what to look for when they monitor dining at their facility including such things as use of assistive devices, atmosphere in the dining room, appearance of the food, positioning, etc. Our intent is to also include Best Practices so volunteers will have ideas they can discuss with administrative staff at their facility, and to help set higher performance standards.

The local advocates become the "eyes and ears" to ensure that facility activities related to nutrition and hydration are not forgotten once the survey team leaves. We are also planning the same type of training on abuse early next year. By translating federal policy direction into a local reality for our advocate, we believe we are able to help them see that they are an important part of the broader network of partners who share a similar vision.

But while our efforts will continue at the individual facility level, it is our hope that the commitment to system reforms will continue at the federal level. The dedication of Resident Advocate Committee volunteers is impressive. Unlike those who chose careers in long term care, these are men and women

who use their personal time and resources, without compensation, to do what they can to improve the lives of nursing facility residents. While Iowa may have a larger number of trained volunteers than many states, there are volunteers in facilities all across the country who share the same fervent hope for an improved quality of life for those in facilities, and who are looking to federal and state policy makers to be equally committed to the same goal.

Knowing that their advocacy is driven by genuine compassion, it is disheartening to lose good volunteers who feel the regulatory system has let them down and let the residents down. When complaints are not substantiated or the survey process fails to identify problems that residents see every day, or a substandard facility again side-steps a fine, it is difficult for even the most passionate advocate to not become disenchanted. We must continue to reassess the survey process to make it a better measure of the quality of care and quality of life in our facilities.

The Nursing Home Initiatives are a welcomed start at improving our long term care system, but they are only a start. Failure to fully implement the initiatives and continue sharpening our regulatory system would be a breach of trust to our residents, their families, and also thousands of committed volunteers. Thank you.