

***Esprit de Corps: Cultivating Unity
in the Statewide Long Term Care
Ombudsman Program***

Session Summary from the 1999
Annual Training Conference
Atlanta, Georgia

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**The National Long Term Care
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Session Summary from the Annual Training Conference
April 1999

This session was designed to provide an opportunity for State Long Term Care Ombudsmen (SLTCO) to gain new insight into the dynamics between the responsibility of administering a federally mandated statewide program *and* creating a sense of common purpose, an esprit de corps, among everyone working in the program. Following panel presentations by local ombudsmen, there were small group discussions with participation by state and local ombudsmen. The session concluded with the sharing of suggestions from each group.

Highlights of the presentations and the small groups follow. Comments are recorded as they were stated; however, they are blended to avoid redundancy.¹ Issues discussed included:

- How state ombudsmen can help local ombudsmen better serve residents;
- What demands seem or seemed unrealistic;
- Barriers to creating a successful program;
- Suggestions to help local ombudsmen feel like they are an important part of the program; and
- Strategies for overcoming barriers to unity.

This summary is provided for your use in considering the connectedness, the unity, in the statewide LTCOP in your state. Hopefully, ombudsmen will pick up a few tips or areas for refinement as well as some affirmation for good management and team building practices that are already in place.

BACKGROUND

The Older Americans Act contains numerous, specific requirements for the Long Term Care Ombudsman Program (LTCOP) and for State Long Term Care Ombudsmen. The requirements that imply a unified statewide program were the foundation for this session. The SLTCO is directed to:

- ensure that residents of long term care facilities have regular and timely access to LTCOP services and timely responses to complaints;
- establish a statewide uniform reporting system.

¹ Although these notes are written as if there is one person fulfilling the program responsibilities at the State level, a SLTCO, the discussion encompassed states where more than one person worked as part of the daily management of the SLTCOP. The same principles were important for others working with the SLTCO who interact with local ombudsmen, e.g. Assistant SLTCO.

The Older Americans Act also includes provisions whereby the SLTCO may designate local entities and individuals as representatives of the LTCOP. There are additional stipulations regarding eligibility for designation, training, responsibilities and functions of representatives of the LTCOP. Implicit in the law is a statewide consistency in LTCOP services.

States use various approaches to fulfill these requirements. Some states have a LTCOP with a *centralized structure* where all, or most, paid ombudsmen are employees of the same state agency or of the entity that houses the SLTCO, such as a non-profit organization. Typically, in this structure the paid ombudsmen are located in different areas of the state instead of being housed in one location. Other states have a *decentralized structure* with a number of designated local LTCOPs whose employees serve as the paid Long Term Care Ombudsmen (LTCO). In both types of structures, some states utilize volunteers as LTCO. There are also variations on these two basic structures for the program in a few states.

The challenge is developing and maintaining a statewide program that operates with unity in spirit and in purpose where its program representatives, ombudsmen, are not located in the same office.

Regardless of the way a SLTCOP is structured, some of the same management issues are present, even on a sporadic basis. One perennial challenge is establishing and maintaining a sense of unity and cohesiveness in a statewide program.

SESSION HIGHLIGHTS

HOW CAN THE SLTCO HELP LOCAL OMBUDSMEN BETTER SERVE RESIDENTS?

Technical Assistance

- Developing and providing tools for local ombudsmen such as a useful policy and procedures manual, e.g. The Georgia LTCOP developed a Policy and Procedures Manual with very clear expectations of local ombudsmen and of programs. Among the benefits for local ombudsmen is minimizing guessing about how to proceed and what are their responsibilities. Consistency in the statewide LTCOP has been increased.
- Providing advice when needed, e.g. offering specific guidance and a consistent approach to some issues instead of being told to “use your own discretion”
- Spending as much time as necessary discussing issues with local ombudsmen to enable them to reach resolution
- Giving scholarships to the NCCNHR Annual Meeting so local LTCO can attend on a rotating basis
- Providing feedback on the reports, the data, from local ombudsmen

Support

- Visiting with local ombudsmen in the field, going to their offices and with them to facilities
- Supporting local ombudsmen when someone complains about them: When complaints are made to SLTCO about a local ombudsman, the SLTCO investigates the complaint and allows the ombudsman to state what she has done. The SLTCO always leaves local ombudsman feeling supported *even if* the SLTCO suggests that the local ombudsman change her methods. Local ombudsmen feel and know they are supported by the SLTCO. The beginning assumption by the SLTCO is that the local ombudsman has correctly followed ombudsman procedures and handled herself appropriately.
- Assisting local ombudsmen in recruiting, training, and maintaining volunteers by:
 - keeping local ombudsmen informed about discussions and plans at the state level, e.g. talking with AARP about a volunteer recruitment campaign;
 - giving local ombudsmen an opportunity for input into relevant committees such as an AARP committee on volunteer development;
 - providing recruitment and training materials, e.g. the new Georgia LTCOP Volunteer Manual containing help for local ombudsmen in recruiting, screening and training volunteers, particularly tips on how to really introduce volunteers to the program before a commitment is made.
- Enabling local ombudsmen and programs to find ways to comply with new standards, policies, outcome measures, or other requirements, engendering a sense of the SLTCO supporting locals in meeting these responsibilities
- Providing statewide training conferences for ombudsmen. At the conferences the STLCO:
 - shares information from the NCCNHR Annual Meeting with everyone;
 - expresses appreciation for the work everyone is doing;
 - provides training and new information pertinent to ombudsman work;
 - involves speakers with a national focus, sometimes speakers from the NCCNHR Annual Meeting.

Accessibility

- Being available to local ombudsmen; when they need assistance in an emergency; local ombudsmen know there are ways to reach the SLTCO
- Returning local ombudsman phone calls promptly

Recognition

- Giving one or more awards to local ombudsmen each year at a statewide meeting
- Providing positive reinforcement for work of individual local ombudsmen or for programs more frequently than once a year, or however often the state monitors the local program

Inter-personal Relationships

- Taking the time to know who local ombudsmen are: ombudsmen aren't just a name, a faceless person. The SLTCO knows local ombudsmen as individuals and encourages free thinking.
- Respecting the work of local ombudsmen
- Being up-front and honest
- Talking with local ombudsmen as equals, not in a condescending way

Concern

- Some of the sense of unity, of being a team, is dependent upon the personalities of the SLTCO and of the local ombudsmen. Different personality types and different management styles can have a major impact upon the sense of unity.

WHAT DEMANDS OF LOCAL OMBUDSMEN OR OF THE LOCAL PROGRAM SEEM, OR SEEMED, VERY UNREALISTIC?

- Being pushed to conduct criminal background checks for LTCOP personnel without knowing what other states are doing, what is standard for other LTCOPs, where the SLTCO is going with this emphasis. More information from the beginning about factors such as: the purpose, the context within the state and nationally, and what plans the SLTCO has, would have been helpful.
- Requirements that create barriers to utilizing volunteers, e.g. having dual standards for volunteer ombudsmen and for paid ombudsmen where the volunteer standards are more stringent than for paid ombudsmen.
- Revised policies and procedures: *Initially* the development of the Georgia LTCOP Policies & Procedures manual seemed overwhelming and created a sense of uneasiness about establishing new standards and their impact on ombudsmen and local programs.

However, it is superb! The policies and procedures helped standardize local ombudsman programs. All local ombudsmen had an opportunity for input into the development before hand and before it was finalized. The policies and procedures make local ombudsmen and programs rise to the occasion; they also allow ways of working if the standards can't be met. These inspire local programs to do more. The policies and procedures provide a basis for comparing one local program to others programs around the state. These also elevated the status of the ombudsmen to a more professional level.

- New expectations for monthly reporting and data entry seemed unrealistic. *However*, because of that expectation, local programs have obtained additional funding from other (new) sources several years in a row. The programs now have the data to prove what they do on a local basis as well as on a statewide basis.

In several of the preceding examples, although the SLTCO's demands initially seemed unrealistic, local ombudsmen said program compliance was required to retain the designation of ombudsman. Factors that appear to make a critical difference in willingness, participation, compliance, and ultimately the outcome are:

- the relationship between the SLTCO and local ombudsmen/programs is built on a sense of mutual trust and respect;
- the process used for developing and implementing the new expectation includes open communication and opportunities for input from the local ombudsmen/programs;
- the outcome proves beneficial to individual ombudsmen and to local programs—there's a sense of a direct, local benefit being derived.

WHAT ARE BARRIERS TO REALIZING A SUCCESSFUL OMBUDSMAN PROGRAM?

Personnel and Qualifications

- SLTCO who come into the position without: an understanding about local ombudsmen or local programs, qualifications to manage local entities and individuals, a working knowledge of the LTCOP.
- SLTCO who are more sensitive to the politics of state government than to advocacy and resident centered work.
- Staff turnover at both state and local levels: LTCOP staff; also among LTCOP supervisors, directors of the designated local programs, and in the host agency for the local program.
- Lack of host agency (designated local ombudsman program entity) understanding of the LTCOP and support for its responsibilities
- Personal relationships in rural areas between ombudsmen and facility employees

Fulfilling Program Responsibilities

- Autonomy or independence issues, e.g. ombudsmen encounter some interference, from the designated local program, the Area Agency on Aging, and/or the local funding agency, with fulfilling ombudsman responsibilities.
- Little SLTCO support for local ombudsmen in circumstances where local ombudsmen encounter interference from the agency that employs and/or funds them.
- Lack of SLTCO support for advocacy on behalf of residents
- Lack of State Unit on Aging support for SLTCO and local ombudsman advocacy: ombudsmen should not fear that the State Unit on Aging will take the side of another state agency instead of being a strong advocate for residents, supporting the LTCOP in carrying out its responsibilities

- SLTCO talks with others about issues involving local ombudsmen without talking with the local ombudsman who is involved in the situation.
- Lack of sharing information: between SLTCO and LTCOP, between local ombudsmen

Structure and Management

- Physical distance between ombudsmen
- Differences between local programs such as: mileage and geographical size of area, salaries, benefits, local in-kind support
- Multiple levels of contracting for the local program: Who's the boss?
- Insufficient numbers of LTCO staff at both state and local levels: at state level need sufficient numbers of staff to respond to technical assistance needs of local ombudsmen in a timely manner
- LTCO staff, at both state and local levels, being assigned other duties that reduce the amount of time devoted to the ombudsman program

WHAT GIVES A LOCAL OMBUDSMAN A SENSE OF BEING AN IMPORTANT PART OF A STATEWIDE PROGRAM?

The SLTCO:

- Uses local ombudsmen on various study groups and panels
- Gives scholarships for one or two local ombudsmen to attend the NCCNHR Annual meeting
- Uses local ombudsmen in various ways according to each ombudsman's strengths: gives each ombudsman opportunities to work on various projects or provide comments on proposals or plans; give ombudsmen a chance to do things outside their usual daily duties
- Uses local ombudsmen, paid and volunteer, to give guidance to SLTCO in considering, developing, and/or revising processes and tools used by the LTCOP

Others:

- Social contact with other local ombudsmen at statewide LTCOP conferences twice a year
- Participation in a statewide organization of local ombudsmen: opportunities for training, information exchange, collectively working on projects
- Frequent communication and information exchange: from SLTCO to local ombudsmen and vice versa; opportunities to share ideas across the state
- Coordination among ombudsmen on issues within the state and also in conjunction with national issues or initiatives such as NCCNHR's focus on staffing
- Participation in national associations: the National Association for State Long Term Care Ombudsman Programs or the National Association of Local Long Term Care Ombudsmen
- Connection to NCCNHR and to the National Ombudsman Resource Center

SUGGESTIONS FOR OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO PROGRAM EFFECTIVENESS AND SENSE OF UNITY

- A pager for the SLTCO to facilitate responsiveness to local ombudsmen who need guidance and advice
- Sufficient staff in the SLTCO Office to be responsive to local ombudsman needs without long delays
- More frequent training for local ombudsmen in a central location, or at least within regions
- More effective use of technology for exchanging information such as: e-mail, scanners, voice mail
- Increased funding for the program
- Sharing of information, including information about helpful contacts and available resources for ombudsmen
- Using a reporting system that accurately reflects the full scope of ombudsman responsibilities and activities

RECAP OF THE KEY THEMES TO DEVELOP AN ESPIRIT DE CORPS

- The LTCOP works best when it is a participatory process: local and state ombudsmen work in collaboration and cooperation with each other.
- Both state and local ombudsmen value their relationships and each other.
- Good communication processes and skills are used. Information is timely and flows freely between state and local ombudsmen and among ombudsmen.
- The SLTCO supports local ombudsmen by:
 - giving ombudsmen a chance to vent, to blow off steam, when needed;
 - providing emotional support;
 - giving positive reinforcement, encouragement, and recognition when needed and deserved;
 - giving ombudsmen opportunities to participate in projects, committees, have a role in shaping the LTCOP and working with other agencies beyond the scope of their normal, daily work.