

Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program and Voting in LTC Facilities

Key Findings

Based on an online questionnaire sent to all state and local ombudsman programs:

- 47% of all state and local ombudsman programs reported being involved in at least one activity related to voting rights.
- 25% of all programs are engaged in other activities such as creating and distributing voter guides, brochures and other educational materials.
- The size of the program (number of staff in the program and the number of long-term care facilities served) is associated with the program involvement in these activities.
- There are no significant differences between the specific activities in which state and local programs are involved.
- According to ombudsmen, facility staff and family members are the most active groups in helping residents to exercise their right to vote. The least active groups are non-partisan political groups, political parties and officials from the Board of Elections.
- 64% of the ombudsmen reported that residents with cognitive impairments in their geographic area received some help from at least one group.
- Only 8% of the state and local ombudsman programs reported to have received a complaint related to voting rights during this year.

Activities of the Ombudsman Program

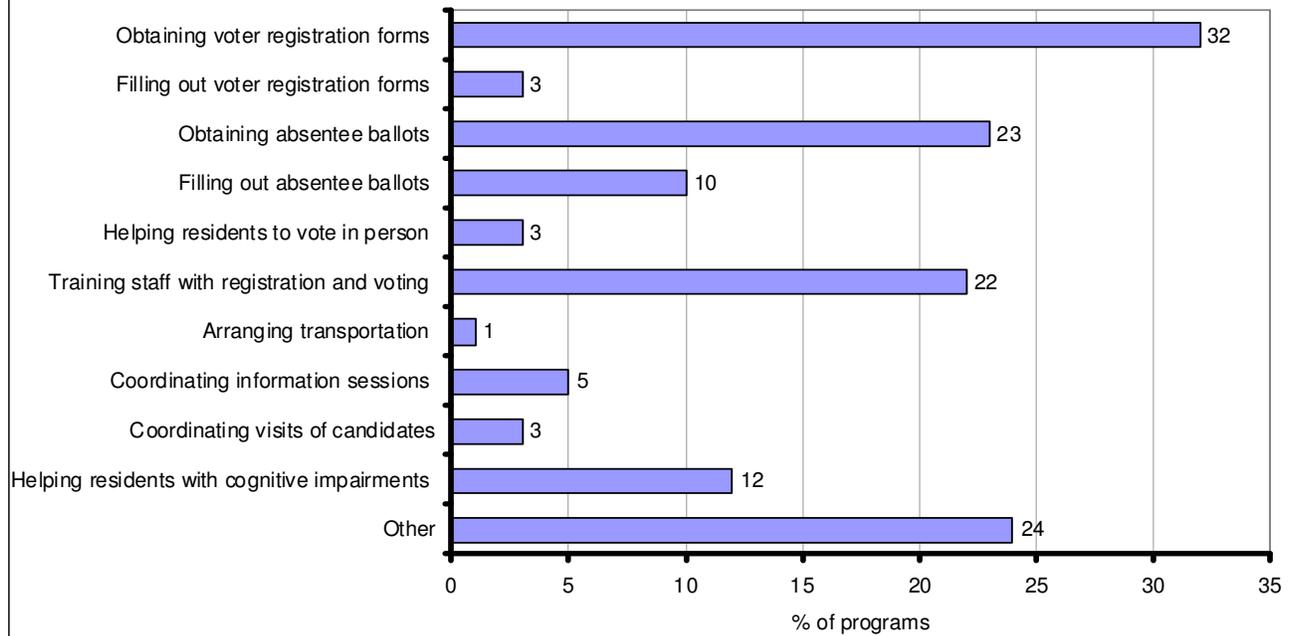
Ombudsman programs across the nation are involved in a variety of activities related to helping residents of long-term care facilities exercise their right to vote. Roughly 47% of all state and local ombudsman program programs reported being involved in at least one activity related to voting rights.

“It is imperative that Ombudsmen emphasize the importance of voting to residents and staff of LTC facilities. It is a right and empowers the residents, who sometimes feel they are no longer part of the world. Voting helps to preserve dignity and keep residents engaged in life, which I feel is essential to survival.”
LTC Ombudsman

The most common activities of the state and local LTC ombudsman programs are helping residents to obtain voter registration forms, helping residents to request absentee ballots and training facility staff on issues related to residents' right to vote (**FIGURE 1**).

LTC ombudsman programs are less active in activities such as arranging transportation to the polls, helping residents to fill out registration forms and to vote in person. Only 12% of the programs report being involved in helping residents with dementia and other cognitive impairments.

Figure 1: Activities of the LTC Ombudsman Program



Almost a quarter of all programs are engaged in other activities not mentioned in the survey. These activities include creating and distributing voter guides, brochures and other educational materials about voting rights. During this year, many ombudsman programs reminded facility staff and residents about the proximity of important deadlines.

Differences Among Programs

State ombudsman programs are involved in more activities than local programs. In fact, 51% of state programs are involved in at least one activity related to voting rights. In contrast, 44% of the local programs are involved in at least one activity. Although local programs are less involved, they have greater variation in their involvement. For instance, 5% of local programs are involved in more than 5 activities, while no state program reported being involved in more than 5 activities. There are no statistically significant differences

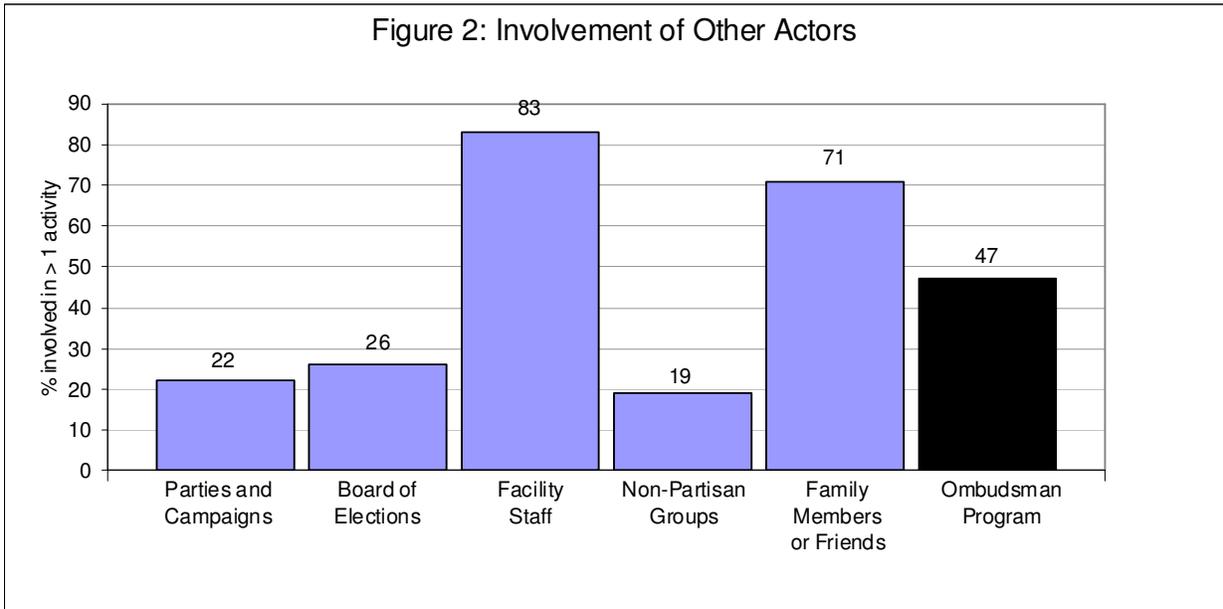
between the specific activities in which state and local programs are involved.

Program Size and Resources

Larger programs are more involved than smaller programs. The differences in involvement are significant when compared by the number of staff in the program (paid and volunteers) and the number of long-term care facilities served. However, there is no association between the ratio of staff per facility and the total number activities in which programs are involved.

Programs that allocate or receive funding for activities related to voting rights are more involved in more activities than programs that did not count with resources. 69% of programs with resources are involved in at least one activity, while only 51% of the programs without resources are involved in at least one activity. A similar proportion of state and local programs receive funding for voting related activities.

Figure 2: Involvement of Other Actors



In terms of specific activities, ombudsman programs that have resources are more likely to be involved in the activities listed in **FIGURE 1** than programs without resources, with the exception of providing residents with transportation to the polls, coordinating visits of candidates, and helping residents to vote in person.

Involvement of Other Actors

Ombudsman programs were asked to identify other actors in their geographic area that are involved in helping residents to exercise their right to vote. (**FIGURE 2**) According to their responses, facility staff is the most active group in helping residents to exercise their right to vote. 83% of the ombudsmen reported that facility staff in their geographic area were involved in at least one activity related to voting rights. Family members or friends of residents rank in second place with 71%. The least active groups are non-partisan political groups, political parties and officials from the Board of Elections.

According to the responses provided by the ombudsmen, each actor is involved in a different set of activities. The top three activities in which facility staff is involved are: helping residents to obtain (86%) and fill out voter registration forms (85%), and helping residents to obtain absentee ballots (84%). Family members are engaged in very similar activities.

On the other hand, political parties, the board of elections and non-partisan groups are involved in other activities. The top three activities of political parties are: coordinating visits of candidates to facilities, coordinating information sessions, and helping residents to obtain voter registration forms. The top three activities of the board of elections are: helping residents to request absentee ballots, training facility staff, and helping residents to obtain voter registration forms. Lastly, the top activities of non-partisan groups are: helping residents to obtain and fill-out voter registration forms, and training

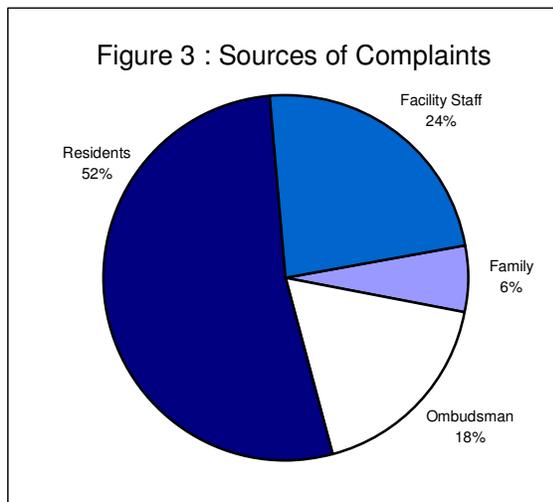
“It would be great if candidates cared enough to go out and see these folks in the nursing homes and engaged them in the process. This is something that we as ombudsman try to ensure that takes place for the residents as their right. It is seen by the nursing home, and most people, as just an activity and not necessarily a right as a citizen.” LTC Ombudsman

for facility staff on voting and registration.

Residents with dementia and other cognitive impairments benefited from the activism of these actors. 64% of the ombudsmen reported that residents with cognitive impairments in their geographic area received some help from at least one of these actors. This help was significantly more likely to come from facility staff and family members than any other group.

Voting Rights Related Complaints

Only 8% of the state and local ombudsman programs reported to have received a complaint related to voting rights during this year. Certain programs were more likely to receive complaints than others. For example, programs that were involved in more than one activity were more likely to receive a complaint about voting rights than programs that were not involved in any activity. In addition, programs with larger staff were also more likely to receive complaints than programs with smaller staff. However, there were no differences between the percentage of complaints received between state and local programs, and between programs with resources and programs without resources.



According to the ombudsmen, residents were the source of these complaints 50% of the time (FIGURE 3). Facility staff, ombudsmen and family/friends were also sources of complaints. There were no other sources reported in the questionnaire.

Lessons and Best Practices

As we move closer to the November Presidential Election, this study shows that there are many challenges and opportunities for greater involvement of the state and local ombudsman programs. Many programs lack the resources and the personnel to be involved in issues beyond quality of care. However, the results show that even in the absence of such resources many programs have engaged in basic activities that could have great potential in increasing the voter turnout of residents of long-term care facilities such as:

- Reminding facility staff and residents of important deadlines such as the last day of registration and the last day for requesting an absentee ballot.
- Providing residents with voter registration forms and absentee ballot applications.

About the Data

The data presented in this brief was collected using an online questionnaire that was sent to all state and local long-term care ombudsmen to their official email accounts using NORC's listserv. The responses were collected from September 16 to October 1, 2008. The total number of valid responses was 227, which is ~35% of all state and local long-term care ombudsman programs. If you have any questions about the study or the data, please contact:

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