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Strengthening the Connection Between State and Local Long-Term Care Ombudsmen: Management Practices to Improve Coordination

A RESOURCE BRIEF

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STRENGTHENING THE CONNECTION BETWEEN STATE AND LOCAL LONG-TERM CARE OMBUDSMEN: MANAGEMENT PRACTICES TO IMPROVE COORDINATION

An Office of the State Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program (SLTCOP) functions as a whole, statewide, unified, integrated program delivering a range of individual, systemic, and educational efforts¹.

According to the Institute of Medicine's seminal report, *Real People Real Problems: An Evaluation of the Long-Term Care Ombudsman Programs of the Older Americans Act*, the preceding statement captures the spirit of the Ombudsman Program provisions in the Older Americans Act.

This view of the program is widely accepted as the goal for the long-term care ombudsman program in each state. Implementing a statewide, unified, integrated program that functions as a whole in delivering the range of advocacy efforts is an ongoing quest. National training sessions have been conducted and tools and resources have been developed to assist states in achieving specific aspects of this goal. This resource brief for state ombudsmen focuses on management practices to improve the coordination between state and local ombudsmen which contribute to a unified, integrated program.

OMBUDSMAN PROGRAM MANAGEMENT

Ombudsman Program management varies from state to state. Local staff ombudsmen may be employees of the SLTCOP or of a contract agency such as an area agency on aging. Local ombudsmen may include volunteers and staff. In most states, local ombudsmen live and work in different areas of the state to be more accessible to residents. Given the difference in employers and areas of the state that are covered, creating and maintaining a sense of unity in purpose among all ombudsmen presents challenges for a state ombudsman. Even in states where all ombudsmen are direct employees of the State Long-Term Care Ombudsman (SLTCO), with local ombudsmen focused on representing residents in specific facilities or in a geographic area, fostering a sense of connection to an integrated statewide program under the leadership of the state ombudsman is not easy.

Recent reductions in SLTCOP budgets add to the challenges of a unified program. Some states have eliminated or reduced the number of statewide training programs and conferences. Reductions in the number of ombudsman staff have occurred, making attending training sessions and connection to the state office more difficult due to the resulting increase in work load. Staff turnover and new

¹ Adapted from statement in *Real People Real Problems: An Evaluation of the Long-Term Care Ombudsman Programs of the Older Americans Act*. Institute of Medicine. 1995. Summary, p. 5. http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=9059

volunteers contribute to an ongoing need for connecting newer individuals to the SLTCOP network. Establishing communication and coordination processes to link the SLTCOP network requires dialogue, innovation, and occasional refinement. Processes may need to change as technology and the number of ombudsmen change.

TIPS FOR STATEWIDE COMMUNICATION AND COORDINATION

One of the best resources for tips on this topic is the paper, *Esprit de Corps: Cultivating Unity in the Statewide Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program*, available from the National Ombudsman Resource Center. This brief paper is the culmination of a dialogue session between state and local ombudsmen. It covers the following topics.

- How can the SLTCO help local ombudsmen better serve residents?
- What demands of local ombudsmen or of the local program seem, or seemed, very unrealistic?
- What are barriers to realizing a successful ombudsman program?
- What gives a local ombudsman a sense of being an important part of a statewide program?
- Suggestions for overcoming barriers to program effectiveness and sense of unity.

What Do Local Long-Term Care Ombudsmen Need From Their State Ombudsman? is another key resource for state ombudsmen. It is a page of tips developed by the National Association of Local Long-Term Care Ombudsmen and is included as an appendix to this resource brief.

Additional tips shared by state ombudsmen during various training sessions are included in this resource brief as a supplement to the existing resources. Tips that are from a specific individual are credited. Tips that are not attributed to a specific person have been voiced by more than one state ombudsman or do not have an identified speaker.

Communication Basics

- Communicate the vision and mission of the SLTCOP. To operate as a unified statewide program, you [SLTCO] set the tone and expectation for statewide participation. As the state ombudsman you must:
 - articulate the vision of the SLTCOP,
 - develop relationships with local ombudsmen, and
 - engage them in contributing to the overall program that encompasses more than the view of local program.

One approach to engage ombudsmen in viewing the program as a statewide program is to have regular meetings with the ombudsman coordinators, lead ombudsmen, or key staff ombudsmen from each area, to discuss substance and program strategies. Focus on the priorities of the SLTCOP. The meetings are not for training but are a time to discuss overall program direction and strategies. Some states do this via conference call.

- Communication is not just talking, it is also listening! *Faith Fish, New York State Ombudsman, 2003.*
- Communication is a two-way process, not just top down unless you need something from the field.
- Many times "communication breakdowns " are relationship breakdowns because relationship issues haven't been dealt with. *Marilyn Broughton, Management Consultant, Presentation to SLTCO, May 5, 1991.*
- "A good ombudsman will be critical, demanding, impatient. The qualities that make them good advocates will also be used on you. Therefore a SLTCO needs: credibility, honesty, and patience. Do a self-evaluation, where do you lack credibility as a SLTCO? Work on these areas." *Becky Kurtz, Georgia SLTCO, NORC Training, February 10, 2003.*

Building Relationships with Local Ombudsmen

- As the SLTCO, you are responsible for managing the statewide program. Your role is to equip and enable local ombudsmen and local programs. Be visible in your leadership and support. "Local ombudsmen need to see you in your role as manager, helping get them what they need to do their job." *Hollis Turnham, Michigan SLTCO, October 1994.*
- Visit the ombudsmen in their offices to see their world, working conditions, and their relationships with others in their work environment.
 - Ask the ombudsman to take you to an excellent facility and to a facility where there are chronic problems or to a facility where they want the state ombudsmen to be visible.
- Offer ongoing opportunities for ombudsmen to connect with you and with their peers. As part of initial training for staff ombudsmen, or for ombudsman program coordinators, some SLTCOPs include one or more days in the state office. States say that this experience provides a sense of how to work together, an overview of what goes on in the SLTCOP, role clarification, dialogue, and helps in establishing a connection to the state program.
 - Some programs provide another ombudsman as a mentor to a new person. During initial training, select a more experienced peer as a mentor to supplement and strengthen connections to the statewide program as well as to other ombudsmen.
 - Many states conduct regular meetings or training programs for ombudsmen. In addition to the substantive information or skills development, these meeting are key to establishing a connection among ombudsmen and to the statewide program. Regular meetings also help counter isolation for ombudsmen who are in one person programs.
 - Include opportunities for sharing among ombudsmen in regularly scheduled meetings or training programs. Be intentional so that information and ideas flow.
 - Engage in dialogue with ombudsmen: listen, ask for ideas, questions, or feedback.

Respond to what you hear and follow through afterwards.

- If possible, offer a statewide conference for all ombudsmen, paid and volunteer.
- If your SLTCOP contracts with area agencies on aging or other agencies to operate local ombudsman programs, cultivate a relationship with the directors of these agencies. Carol Scott, Missouri SLTCO, said that this approach enhanced her relationships with the local ombudsmen.
- Clarify the communication and responsibility lines between the SLTCOP and local ombudsmen. For example, the Indiana SLTCOP Rules² give the SLTCO the authority to designate the local ombudsman entities [programs] and say that the local entity shall "provide nonombudsman program related supervision, i.e., attendance, appropriate office behavior, etc." The responsibilities of the SLTCO include, "provide programmatic direction, instruction, guidance, and assistance to the local ombudsman entity," and "involve the local ombudsman entity in program planning and policy development." The duties of the local ombudsman include "accept the direction, instruction, guidance, and assistance of the state ombudsman, in consultation with the local ombudsman entity, in all program activities."
 - Provide clear guidance in policies, rules, or some other mechanism regarding communication flow and responsibility lines of authority.
 - Develop a visual depiction such as a flow chart or organizational chart as a quick reference.
 - Reinforce the guidance whenever applicable in training scenarios, presentations, and printed information for ombudsmen as well as for others in the aging network and the public.

Communication and Coordination

Shape the Expectations

- Lead by example. Model what you want to see across the state.
- Create a culture and an expectation of sharing. A pattern of sharing resources and knowledge contributes to a sense of identity with a unified, statewide program.
 - Share your materials, resources and information with all local programs. Share pertinent highlights when you return from a national conference.
 - Encourage local program sharing by creating opportunities for them to present what they have learned, developed, or are working on with their peers.
 - Encourage local programs to help each other. For example, if one program has a good way of teaching a certain topic and another program wants to see how that works, encourage that cross-fertilization.
 - Be careful that competition does not occur between programs. Avoid having one be seen

² Title 460 Division of Disability, Aging, and Rehabilitative Services. §460 IAC 1-7-6 (3); §IAC 1-7-7 (1) (4); §460-IAC 1-7-9 (12).Indiana Register, Volume 23.

as the "star," each program or staff ombudsman has weaknesses and strengths.

- Create a culture where local ombudsmen are encouraged to contact you with questions or for information.
 - Be responsive or establish a way to address their questions in a timely manner.
 - If you have other staff who respond to calls from local ombudsmen, make time to take some of the calls yourself.
 - Create a way for ombudsmen to talk with you when needed.
 - Be available to local ombudsmen during a crisis.
 - Share responses to questions that may be applicable to all ombudsmen with everyone. This practice contributes to a shared knowledge, common approaches, and a sense of openness.
- Initiate communication and be alert for opportunities to build confidence and skills in local ombudsmen by asking them for their ideas before telling them what to do when they call asking for guidance or feedback.
- Introduce a change in the program by giving ombudsmen a "heads up," a chance to prepare, and an explanation about why the change is necessary and is part of their regular LTCOP responsibilities. This is especially important when the change is part of an organized effort that affects ombudsman time and work load. Becky Kurtz, Georgia SLTCO, NORC Training, May 15, 2007.
- When possible, give local ombudsmen an opportunity to comment on changes in policy or procedures; their input may identify unintended negative consequences or alert you to resistance that needs to be addressed.

Communication with Others

- Establish a protocol with local ombudsmen regarding how you will address complaints against an ombudsman. For example, if a provider calls Beverley Laubert, Ohio SLTCO, about an ombudsman, Bev calls the local ombudsman. She says that the provider called and asks if there is anything that she needs to know or to do. Bev and the ombudsman jointly develop a strategy regarding what actions to take and how to follow-up.
- If you have contact with a provider, let the local ombudsman know about it.

Travel Beyond the State Office

- When you go to a local area, let the ombudsman know that you are coming and why.
 - Invite a local ombudsman to join you as appropriate.
 - Provide feedback to the local program after the event, meeting, or presentation.
- Avoid doing anything that would undermine a local LTCOP's relationship with another local

agency, facilities, or elected officials.

Connect Your Work to Local Ombudsman Work

- Keep ombudsmen informed about key areas of activity and focus for you.
 - They need to know how you are working to enable and support their programs, resources, and advocacy.
 - Local ombudsmen need to know how what you do helps them and benefits residents. To someone focused on individual advocacy, the amount of time that you spend in agency meetings that do not have an apparent connection to the program or to residents may convey a lack of concern for action on their issues.
 - Share information about key, relevant activities that reflect your advocacy and leadership and briefly explain how what you do relates to what they do.
 - Share the data and statistical information from local programs with the ombudsmen on a regular basis. Discuss the data compiled from their work during regular training programs or meetings to show the connection between the data and their individual and systems advocacy.

Newsletters

- Some SLTCO distribute a one or two page newsletter for all local ombudsmen. A hard copy of the newsletter may be mailed from the local LTCOP or from the SLTCOP to ombudsmen without easy access to the internet. Examples of the newsletter contents from different states include brief:
 - Description of purpose, distribution, confidentiality, and disclaimers as appropriate,
 - Updates on the most significant meetings/contacts of the SLTCO and the connection to residents or the program,
 - Updates on any other meetings/contacts that an ombudsman has had on behalf of the statewide program,
 - Highlights of national meetings or conferences attended by any ombudsman,
 - Alerts for breaking news that ombudsmen need to know,
 - Highlights from local programs including examples of outstanding successes on behalf of residents and tidbits that foster a personal connection among ombudsmen,
 - Responses to a "question of the month,"
 - Information about new materials or training resources, including those developed by a local program.
- Tips for managing a newsletter include:
 - Immediately after a key meeting, jot a brief note of highlights so that it is ready to insert into the next newsletter.
 - If there is only one item to share, send the information right away in a brief email message.

- Ask for feedback regarding the content and style and make adjustments.
- Be clear when you need a response to a newsletter item. Note why the information is needed and important to the program. Be sure to include a specific time to respond.
- Create a newsletter schedule your office can realistically keep.
- Send a notice when you cannot get a newsletter out and must skip an issue.

Sharing Information from National Sources

- Provide a brief overview of the information and any suggestions for using it,
- Highlight a few, key areas that are the most important to encourage ombudsmen to scan some selections instead of being overwhelmed and deleting or filing it without reading it.
- Ask for feedback regarding what to send, how often to send, and how to assist programs in using the resources.

Share the Ownership and Personal Investment

- Develop rules, policies and procedures, program measures, forms, or other program materials through a collaborative process with local ombudsmen or with the local ombudsman association.
- Ask for volunteers to help develop or revise a particular product, such as a program poster.
 - Try to include different people in these tasks.
 - Use their input and products in developing the final product for the statewide program.
- Ask ombudsmen to represent the SLTCOP on a task force or in a state or regional meeting.
 - Assist by providing any background information, concerns, and by discussing the position of the SLTCOP and the role of the ombudsmen in the meeting or on the task force.
 - Ask for an update after each meeting and jointly develop strategy prior to the next meeting as necessary.
- Ask local ombudsmen to assist with one of the regular training programs or meetings. Some SLTCO do this by asking ombudsmen to volunteer to work with a few peers to:
 - plan one of the regularly scheduled training programs,
 - bring a fun activity,
 - conduct an ice breaker, or
 - bring snacks.

This volunteer responsibility may be a one time commitment or time limited.

- Identify the strengths and interests of ombudsmen and seek to find ways for each person to contribute to the statewide program from their strength or area of interest.
- Send different ombudsmen to various training programs with content related to ombudsman work. Afterwards ask the ombudsmen to share the key points, most applicable ideas, or new information and resources with all ombudsmen.
- Allow local ombudsmen to say "No" to a request to represent the statewide program or to participate in a work group. Do not overburden a local ombudsman.
- Publicly acknowledge exemplary advocacy or service by an ombudsman. Some programs have annual awards for the ombudsman who resolved the most complex case or who went "above and beyond" to obtain the resident's desired outcome. Many programs include examples of ombudsman work in the SLTCOP's annual report or in agency newsletters that are widely distributed. Be careful not to show signs of favoritism and work to spread praise in an impartial way.

SUMMARY

The model for the SLTCOP is a unified advocacy program that is accessible to residents throughout the state. The SLTCO must juggle several roles in developing and supporting a statewide program: advocate, leader, mentor/teacher, and cheerleader for local ombudsmen. Debi Lee³ summarized what ombudsmen need from their SLTCO: communication, an infrastructure to guide and support their actions, timely information, and support. These are essential to enable local ombudsmen to engage in "zealous advocacy" on behalf of residents. The key to establishing and strengthening the connection between state and local ombudsmen is communication. Information must flow between the two, listening is essential, and it must be a participatory process. A unified program gives consumers throughout the state a consistent response from local ombudsmen and a stronger advocacy voice. Strengthening the connection between state and local ombudsmen is an ongoing process that benefits residents as well as ombudsmen. The effort is a "win win" for everyone!

3 April 2005 orientation for new SLTCO, presentation by Debi Lee on behalf of the National Association of Local Long-Term Care Ombudsmen. Debi is a LTCO with the Centralina Area Agency on Aging, Charlotte, NC.

**WHAT DO LOCAL LONG-TERM CARE OMBUDSMEN NEED FROM THEIR
STATE LONG-TERM CARE OMBUDSMAN?
TIPS FROM THE
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF LOCAL LONG-TERM CARE OMBUDSMEN**

PRESENTED BY DEBI LEE, CHAIR OF NALLTCO, OCTOBER 2005

1. Establish strong LTCO Program policy and leadership backed by data. Don't assume that your local LTCO (LLTCO) know what the data is and what it does.
2. Offer frequent and collective meetings, accomplish meaningful and important work, even via teleconference.
3. Support and encouragement to participate in the national network of LLTCO. The exchange of information that is going on across or among LLTCO nationwide is as important to local ombudsmen as the information exchange across and among SLTCO is you.
4. Be the expert in long-term care and to share the information and your expertise with LLTCO.
5. Exert leadership at the state level with other agencies. Sometimes include and/or use LLTCO by asking a LLTCO to attend a meeting on behalf of the LTCOP.
6. Provide legal support for LLTCO.
7. Represent LLTCO at national training programs, network on behalf of LLTCO. Bring the information back and share it with LLTCO leadership.
8. Provide good, credible training for LLTCO.
9. Visit LLTCO in their offices (local).
10. Provide technology for LLTCO (or leadership in getting it) and the ability to share relevant information in a timely manner. Flag the information that is urgent so that LLTCO recognize it.
11. Be consistent in hiring and firing in LLTCOP. Although the LLTCO position often has entry level pay, it is not an entry level position. Establish a fair process to look into allegations against a LLTCO.
12. Handle the volunteer LTCOP the same way that paid ombudsman positions are handled (refer to #11).
13. Be very, very clear with the sponsoring agency of LLTCOP regarding what the responsibilities are. Don't leave the LLTCO to take on that battle alone. Stand up for what LLTCOP roles and/or rules are such as confidentiality of files.