

BEING A SENIOR OMBUDSMAN

by Ventura County Supervisor Linda Parks, June 2007

As our population ages, society is turning more of its attention to meeting the growing needs of our senior population. Not only are more people than ever becoming seniors, people are also living longer. While many seniors are putting off retirement, often for financial and health insurance reasons, many more are retired and able to volunteer. Not ready to hit the rocking chair or spend *all* of their time on the golf course, seniors have remained active working in part-time positions, taking care of grandchildren, providing volunteer assistance to local agencies, and enjoying the fruits of their labor with travel and leisure activities.

While the Golden Years can be the best years of our lives, there is also the concern that with aging, our bodies will become frail and/or our mental faculties will decline, so that we can no longer live independently without assistance. This concern was expressed in a survey of Thousand Oaks senior citizens that found at the top of their list was their desire for in-home care services so they could remain in their homes even when facing difficulties. In recent years in-home care services has grown into a multi-million dollar industry in Ventura County and the demand for these services continues to grow.

Even with more seniors receiving assistance in their homes, there are many who have to move to skilled nursing facilities and residential care homes. It is estimated that 40 percent of people who reach the age of 65 will spend time in a long-term-care facility. Unfortunately, many seniors who live in these facilities may have out-lived their spouses and may not have friends who visit. Having a friendly face stop by to visit can mean the world to them. More importantly, having someone check to see that they are receiving the necessary care can make the difference between life and death in some cases. Regular visits by someone who cares can certainly make a huge difference in improving their outlook.

Ventura County is fortunate to have a cadre of caring adults, mostly senior citizens, who volunteer their time through Long Term Care Services of Ventura County to be a visiting ombudsman. These volunteers check in on seniors who live in long-term care facilities to offer them a friendly smile and to see how they are doing. They also check the facility to assure cleanliness, safety, and proper care of the residents.

They say one of the ways we can judge society is by the way we treat our most vulnerable. Yet we hear of stories of facilities that do not properly care for ill seniors. I know of a senior at one facility who had an aide that was stealing her pain pills, leaving the bed-ridden woman in pain; and of another facility where the staff had failed to notice that a sickened senior had become dehydrated. In both of these cases, it was a family member who discovered the problem and fixed it. For the many seniors in these facilities who don't have family or friends to visit, volunteers are needed to check on their welfare.

The number of long-term-care facilities has grown throughout the county, but the number of volunteer ombudsmen has not kept pace, particularly in the Thousand Oaks area. Being a senior ombudsman is such a worthy cause and also quite convenient not only for people who are retired, but also for people who work because visits can be tailored to the volunteer's schedule. Checking on disabled seniors at these facilities can occur after work, on weekends, and on days most convenient to the volunteer. College students, retirees, members of service clubs, churches and synagogues, employees, and all of us adult children who no longer have our own parents to comfort; can volunteer to comfort seniors who could use a caring friend. To sign up for training to become a Senior Ombudsman, please contact Long Term Care Services of Ventura County's ombudsman program at 805-656-1986 or on the internet at www.ombudsmanventura.org.