

## Vancouver volunteer makes impact as long-term care advocate Updated now

Long Term Care Ombudsman Program helps residents in nursing homes, assisted living, adult homes

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Gwen Swenson, a resident at Bonaventure of Vancouver, left, chats with Bob Kyte, a volunteer for the Southwest Washington Regional Long Term Care Ombudsman Program. Since 2019, Kyte has assisted numerous residents in his care and life for the residents he serves. He typically averages 25 to 30 hours of donated time per month and has been a mentor and role model for new volunteers. (Amanda Cowan/The Columbian)

After Bob Kyte retired from his long career as a business executive, he wanted to volunteer somewhere where he could help people.

That was about three years ago. Now, the 68-year-old Vancouver resident volunteers some 25 hours a month for the Southwest Washington Regional Long Term Care Ombudsman Program, where he advocates on behalf of residents living in skilled nursing, assisted living and adult family homes in Clark County.

The role has changed his life, Kyte said.

“You get to visit a lot of really interesting people,” he said. “This is really a unique program because you’re really helping people who, because of their age and a lot of times their health conditions, just need some extra help.”

As a volunteer ombudsman, Kyte [assists residents in resolving issues related to resident rights, quality of life and quality of care.](#)

Thanks to his commitment and dedication to the program, he has become a mentor and role model for the residents he serves and other volunteers, according to Southwest Washington Regional Long Term Care Ombudsman Neil Degerstedt. “Kyte is a shining example of the impact one volunteer can have on the lives of numerous vulnerable adults,” Degerstedt said.

Kyte mainly visits residents and gets to know them. But his purpose is to be an advocate if any of his residents feel that their rights are being violated. However, volunteers only act to resolve a complaint if a resident expressly asks them to do so.

When Kyte joined the program in 2019, he mostly assisted residents with complaints related to personal care, hygiene issues and dietary requirements. Those are still complaints he frequently encounters, but the COVID-19 pandemic created a whole new set of issues.

“COVID-19 has been a terrible time for residents in these facilities,” he said. “It has really impacted residents’ quality of life because there was such a shutdown of all socialization. The activities that are normally taking place where people would mingle with other residents all had to stop. Meals were served in their rooms rather than in a dining room.

“As volunteers, we spent a lot of our time on those kinds of issues and assisting residents, while at the same time safeguarding them from COVID-19,” Kyte said.

Despite the challenges the pandemic presented, Kyte and other volunteers worked to ensure residents’ needs were being met. For example, Kyte pushed for visitation programs for residents in hospice so they could visit with their families and others.

“Visitation during COVID was very beneficial for the residents,” he said.

The pandemic highlighted the importance of the Long Term Care Ombudsman Program, Degerstedt said.

“The pandemic has taken its toll, with many residents losing their lives to (COVID-19), and numerous others losing their rights due to the many enacted restrictions,” Degerstedt said. “Never has there been a greater need for long-term care advocates than now, and because of our 365-day-a-year access to residents, the ombudsman program is uniquely qualified to reach out to residents in need of advocacy assistance.”

Kyte tries to visit with the residents he serves regularly, and he’s developed deep relationships with many of them.

“You meet a whole bunch of different people, and they enjoy the opportunity mostly to visit with you,” he said. “It’s not like you’re burdening them or vice versa. The visits are generally fairly brief, and I try to visit every resident on a regular basis.”

Each volunteer is assigned to different facilities, and Kyte is responsible for two large, assisted living homes, including [Bonaventure of Vancouver](#). Most volunteers spend about 15 hours a week meeting with residents, but Kyte averages about 25.

That’s one reason he enjoys the role — flexibility.

“A lot of volunteer programs are pretty rigid,” he said. “But by the nature of our program, it’s better to have a flexible schedule. So, I may go in Tuesday afternoon one week, and I may go in Thursday morning the next week depending on my schedule.”

Regional support and support from other volunteers is another reason Kyte enjoys the program. In fact, thanks to a robust training program, it’s something anyone can do no matter their background.

“You’re not out there on your own,” he said.

The program serves more than 6,000 residents across Clark, Cowlitz, Klickitat, Skamania and Wahkiakum counties, and more volunteers are needed.

“If people are interested in helping other people and they want flexibility, then this is a great program,” Kyte said. “Sometimes, you’re working between the resident and the home they’re in. Sometimes, you’re assisting them with family situations that come up. You get into those areas a lot, and you get to be a good, helpful and neutral person who is looking out for the best interest of that resident.”

Above all, the work is rewarding, Kyte said.

“This is people’s quality of life that you’re working with,” he said. “You want to make sure that you’re doing everything you can as a volunteer at the request of the resident to assist them, to get them what they need so that they have the quality of life that they deserve.”

For more information about the Long Term Care Ombudsman Program, or to sign up as a volunteer, visit [www.helpingelders.org/long-term-care-ombudsman-program/](http://www.helpingelders.org/long-term-care-ombudsman-program/).

If you have questions about the program, contact Neil Degerstedt at 360-992-4076 or [Degernd@dshs.wa.gov](mailto:Degernd@dshs.wa.gov).