

STATE OF ALASKA  
THE OFFICE OF THE LONG-TERM CARE  
OMBUDSMAN PROGRAM



# ANNUAL REPORT FFY 2024



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# Letter from the State Long-Term Care (LTC) Ombudsman

Dear Friends,

I am pleased to present the 2024 Annual Report for the Alaska Office of the Long-Term Care Ombudsman (OLTCO). The annual report provides an overview of the activities, accomplishments, and challenges of the OLTCO program during FFY 2024. This report also details the stories, trends, and complaints handled by our office in FFY 2024. OLTCO annual reports are shared with the federal government, the Consumer Voice, State of Alaska policy makers, partner agencies, advocates, and the public.

Mission Matters! Our vision for Alaska is that all Alaskans in long-term care have a high quality of life and high quality of care. The Alaska OLTCO Program is authorized by the federal Older American's Act (OAA). Alaska's OLTCO program is responsible, through federal and state law, for advocating for residents of long-term care facilities. The OLTCO team works daily to resolve complaints that impact the health, safety, rights, and welfare of residents. The team continually educates residents, family members, and staff about residents' rights in long-term care.

Here are a few positive outcomes from our work this year: dedicated team members, increased facility visits, increased community education activities, and increased number of cases and complaints investigated. We work with a core group of volunteers who extend the capacity of our team to reach seniors in long-term care facilities. Due to our efforts to expand our volunteer program and our work with volunteers, the OLTCO participated on a national panel to highlight our recruitment, retention and training efforts of our volunteer program in Alaska. We were able to share tips on recruiting volunteers in rural communities.

Briefly, during the FFY 2024 reporting period, the OLTCO completed 853 facility visits, investigated 496 complaints, provided over 1300 information and assistance activities, attended 32 resident council meetings, participated in 51 community outreach and education activities, and partook in nearly 400 interagency collaborations. Most of the data reflects an increase in each of these activities as compared to last year.

I would like to thank the staff and the dedicated volunteers for the work that they do every day to improve the quality of life for seniors. I want to extend a heartfelt thank you to all partner agencies that collaborate with us to ensure that seniors in Alaska are free of abuse, neglect, and exploitation.

We hope that this report will be informative to you as we all work together to improve the quality of life of seniors in Alaska. Please feel free to reach out to our office if you have questions about this report.

Sincerely,



Stephanie Wheeler, Ph.D.

State Long-Term Care Ombudsman

State of Alaska, The Office of the Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program

# The Office of the Long-Term Care Ombudsman (OLTCO)

## Core Values



Respect



Resolution Focused



Resident Focused



Advocacy



Professionalism

## Mission

The Long-Term Care Ombudsman program is mandated by the Older American's Act and state law to provide resident centered advocacy designed to protect the rights, health, safety and welfare of Alaskans living in skilled nursing facilities and assisted living homes.

## WHAT WE DO AND WHEN TO CALL A LTC OMBUDSMAN



# OLTCO Staff

**Stephanie Wheeler**  
State LTC  
Ombudsman



Systems Issues  
Public Education  
Program Administration

Volunteer Management  
Partner Agency Coordinator  
Case Consultation  
Facility Coverage for the Mat-Su Valley



**Alvin Ancheta**  
Deputy LTC  
Ombudsman

**Leana Christy**  
Assistant LTC  
Ombudsman



Facility Coverage in the Kenai  
Peninsula, Kodiak and Anchorage

Facility Coverage in the Southeast,  
Chugiak and Anchorage



**Kerri Tanner**  
Assistant LTC  
Ombudsman

**Christina Saeteurn**  
Assistant LTC  
Ombudsman



Facility Coverage in the North & West  
Interior, Valdez, Eagle River and  
Anchorage

Intake Processing & Referrals  
Tech/Admin Support  
Volunteer Program Assistance



**Stephanie Welsh**  
LTC Specialist

# Advocating Across Alaska: Our Statewide Presence



- 27 Communities throughout Alaska
- 20 Skilled Nursing Facilities (SNF)
- 954 Residents in SNF
- 704 Assisted Living Homes (ALH)
- 4861 Residents in ALH
- 580,000 Miles of Territory

## Testimonials

*"Thank you for your efforts. I know you thought what you did wasn't very helpful but I believe it was able to swing the pendulum a little bit our way and that was what was needed to really get everybody moving. All of these parts came together and I thank you for that."* -Long-Term Care Resident

*"To the Ombudsman: Many many thanks for your oversight of this care! This is the fastest progress I've seen in quite some time. I remain hopeful for a quick solution."* -Long-Term Care Resident

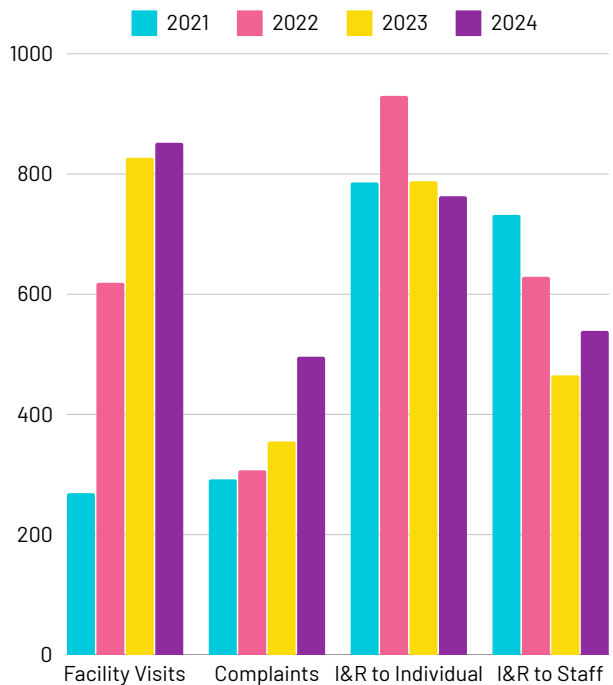
*"After receiving a 30-day discharge notice, I was concerned. I had no idea that the Ombudsman could advocate for us. The Ombudsman took time out of their day to visit with us and to explain your services. The Ombudsman listened to our story, and advocated to get an extension in the facility to allow more time for improvement. The extension was granted. Thank you so very much for the service you provide to our community."* -Long-Term Care Resident Representative



# OLTCO Program Activities FFY 2024

While the primary role of the Office of the Long-Term Care Ombudsman (OLTCO) is to advocate on behalf of seniors in long-term care settings, the OLTCO additional program activities are compiled into the following categories: Cases and Complaints, Facility Visits, Information and Assistance, Interagency Coordination, Community Education, Resident and Family Councils, Survey Participation and Training and Technical Assistance. Each of these activities in some way, impacts the work that we do daily to support seniors in long-term care settings.

Of all 496 complaints that were investigated in FFY 2024, ombudsmen resolved 80% of complaints to the satisfaction of the resident or their resident representative. Every complaint investigated begins with listening to the resident or resident representative's concern and ends with ensuring that the resident is agreeable to the resolution of the complaint. The OLTCO is appreciative of the staff and volunteers who advocate on behalf of seniors to ensure a better quality of life in long-term care settings.



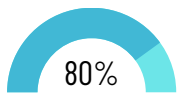
## Snapshot of OLTCO Data FFY 2024



**853** Unannounced Facility Visits



**329** Facilities received more than one visit  
**42** Facilities received a quarterly visit



**80%** of cases resolved to the satisfaction of the resident, resident rep or complainant



**260** Cases Opened  
**277** Cases Closed



**32** Residential Council Meetings  
**3** Family Council Meetings



**25** LTC Ombudsman Volunteers provided **305** hours of service



**398** Interagency Coordination Activities

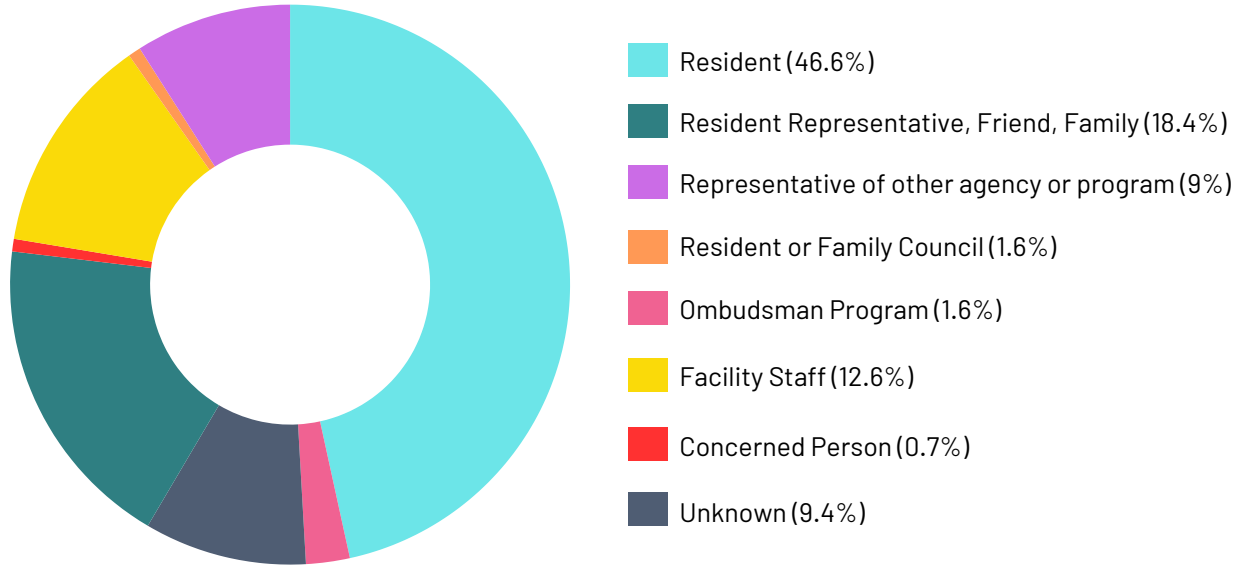


**539** Information & Referral to facility staff



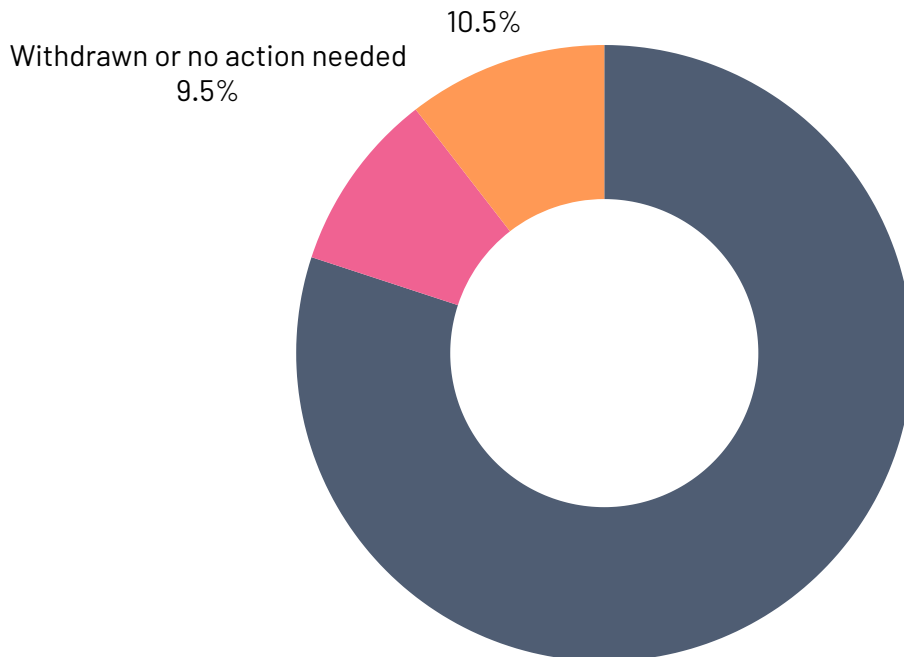
**1302** Information & Referral to individuals/residents

# Who Submitted Complaints FFY 2024?



# Outcome of Complaints (2024)

Not resolved to the satisfaction of the resident, resident rep or complainant



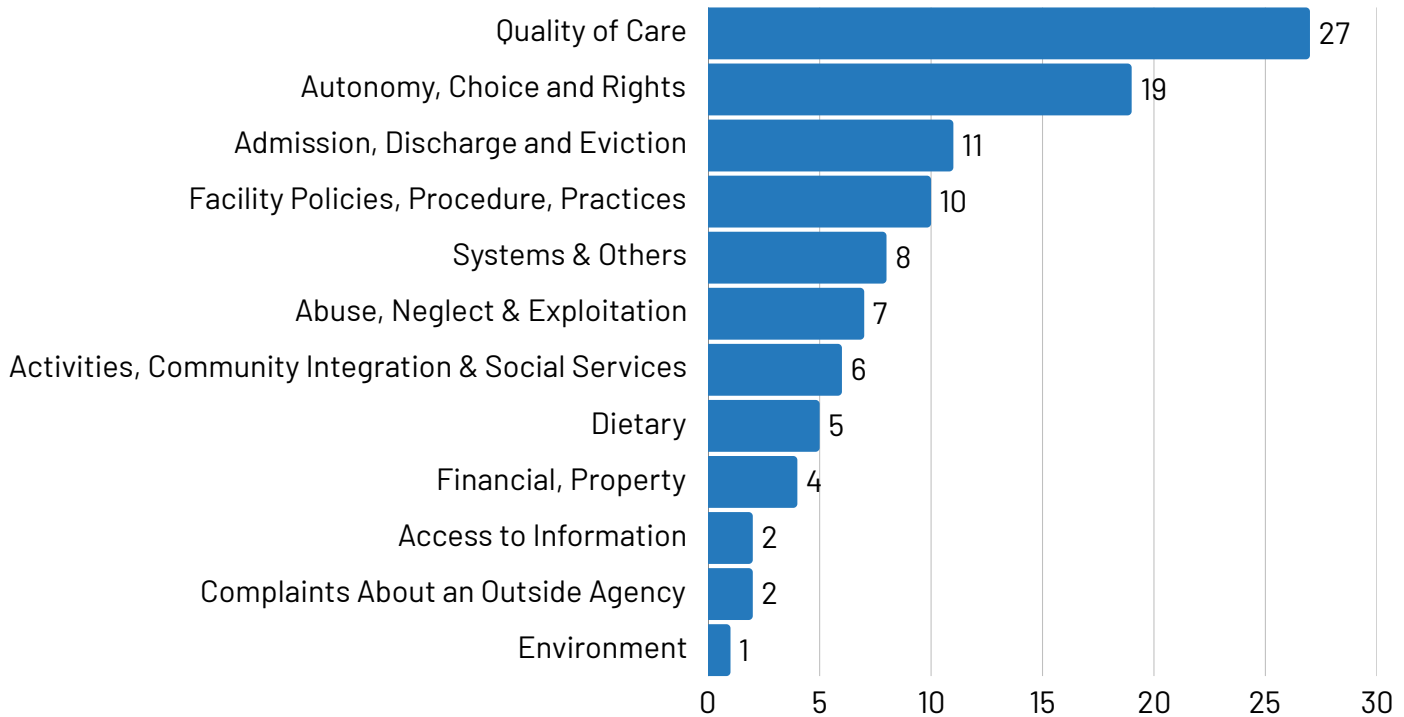
Fully or partially resolved to the satisfaction of the resident, resident rep, or complainant  
80%



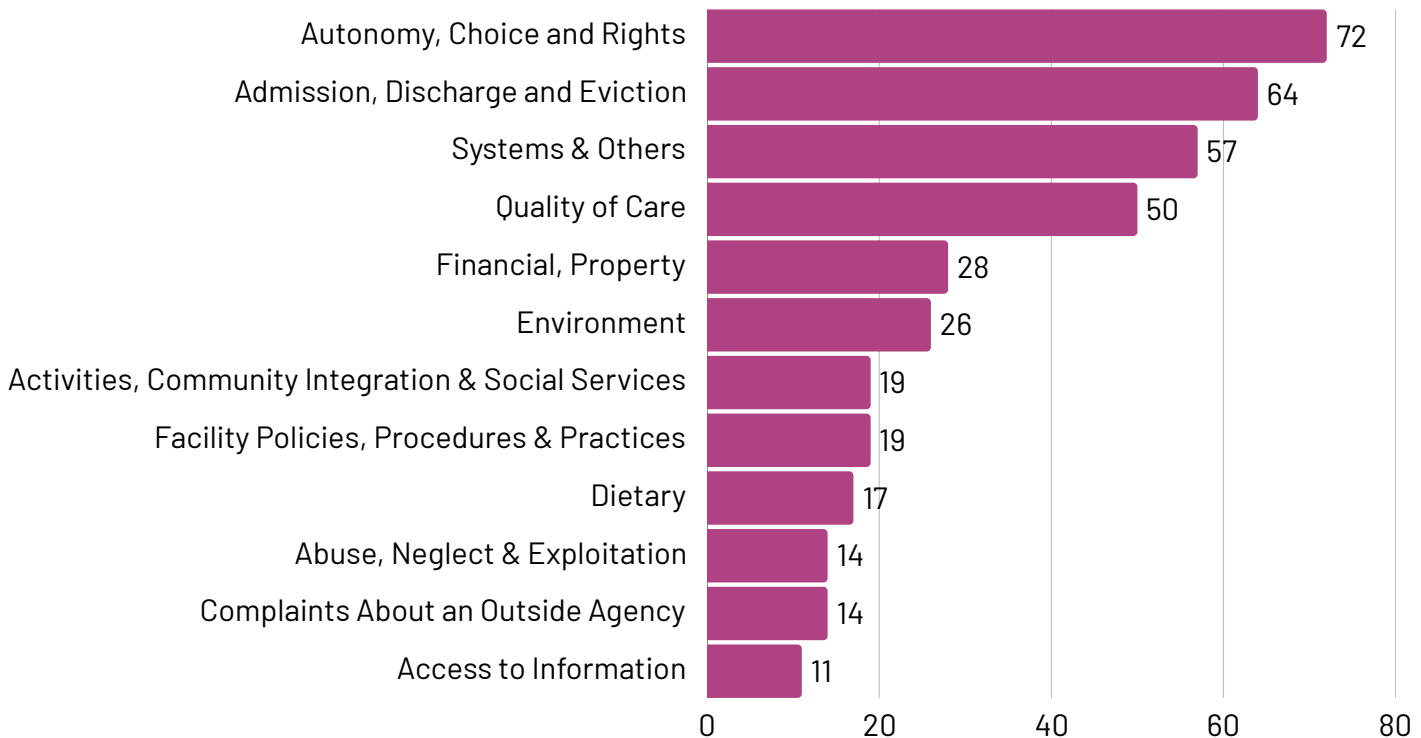
# Complaints FFY 2024

Received by OLTCO in FFY2024

## Skilled Nursing Facility



## Assisted Living Home



# Complaint Definitions

<b>Abuse, Neglect &amp; Exploitation</b>	Failure to protect a resident from harm or failure to meet the needs of the resident which results in a serious risk of health and safety.
<b>Access to Information</b>	Includes denial or delay of access to resident records or information provided in a language or format that is difficult for the resident to understand. This also includes the willful interference with a resident making a complaint to OLTCO.
<b>Admission, Discharge &amp; Eviction</b>	Resident receives a discharge notice and does not want to leave the facility, resident discharged without receiving proper notice; this can also include issues with room assignments and changes.
<b>Autonomy, Choice &amp; Rights</b>	Includes the resident being treated with rudeness, indifference, or insensitivity. This also includes the resident's rights or other preferences not being honored or respected.
<b>Financial, Property</b>	Incorrect billing for services or raising rates without notice. Loss/mismanagement by the facility of a resident's money or property.
<b>Quality of Care</b>	Quality of care issues include response times or failure to respond, hygiene care not provided, medication errors, and failure to follow the care plan.
<b>Activities, Community Integration &amp; Social Services</b>	Includes lack of choice and appropriate activities for residents and individual preferences. Failure by the facility to obtain transportation for medical appointments and community activities.
<b>Dietary</b>	Includes food quantity, quality, variation, choice temperature or timing of the meals do not meet resident expectations. Facility staff fail to assist with dining or provide a diet specified in the resident's care plan.
<b>Environment</b>	The facility interior/exterior is not maintained including building hazards/safety issues or there is inadequate ventilation. This also includes ambient and water temperature too hot or too cold, building accessibility, and housekeeping/pest abatement.
<b>Facility Policies, Procedures &amp; Practices</b>	Mismanagement including but not limited to: administrator is absent, unresponsive, inadequately trained or not supervising staff; incomplete, missing or falsified record keeping; background screening not performed; illegal policies/practices. This also includes lack of fiscal resources that result in staff shortages, lack of food, utilities shut off, etc.
<b>Complaints About an Outside Agency</b>	Includes complaints regarding eligibility for coverage of services including Medicaid, Medicare, VA and private insurance. Complaints specific to actions or inactions of the licensing, certification or regulatory agency.
<b>System &amp; Other Issues</b>	Includes concerns the resident representative or family member interferes with the resident's decision making and preferences related to welfare, safety or rights. This also includes problems with services provided to a resident from an individual or entity not associated with the facility.

# Case Stories

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## Case Story #1

A resident received a 30-day discharge notice from a skilled nursing facility indicating that the resident no longer met level of care. The discharge notice did not have a confirmed location, but only that the resident was placed on a waiting list for a particular assisted living facility. Additionally, the OLTCO did not receive a copy of the discharge notice. According to federal regulations, discharge notices from skilled nursing facilities must contain a specific location to which the resident will be discharged, and a copy of the discharge notice must be sent to the OLTCO. The resident's representative requested assistance from the ombudsman as she was not sure what to do if the resident was not approved for that assisted living home before his 30 days were up.

Once the ombudsman was contacted, the ombudsman requested a copy of the discharge notice from the facility. They reviewed the notice and contacted the assisted living home where the resident was planning on living. The assisted living home confirmed that the resident was only on the waiting list with no confirmed date for admission. The ombudsman followed up with the resident, resident's representative and facility administrator explaining that they did not believe the discharge notice was valid because there was not a confirmed location planned for a safe discharge. The ombudsman worked with the care planning team and the resident to explore additional assisted living home options. The ombudsman encouraged the facility to reissue the discharge notice once a safe discharge location was confirmed.

The facility re-issued the discharge notice after working the resident, resident's representative, and the ombudsman once a safe, discharge location/facility was confirmed. The resident and his representative were happy with the outcome of the discharge planning process.

## Case Story #2

During a routine facility visit, a resident who was known to have behaviors asked for another assessment for dementia. The resident had a stroke a year prior and shortly after given a diagnosis of dementia. The resident was sure that their medications made them "different." This resident was aware that they could be difficult and stated it was due to his frustration with staff treating them in childlike manner which they assumed was due to his dementia diagnosis. They did not require much assistance with their daily activities any longer and really wanted to live outside of assisted living and instead, live in the community.

The ombudsman, with the resident's permission reached out to the power of attorney (POA) to discuss the resident's situation. The POA was aware that the resident had requested a new evaluation but was worried that if it was determined that they didn't have dementia, they would be put into a bad living situation. The POA also worried that if the diagnosis stayed the same, the resident would become more agitated and depressed. The ombudsman assured the POA that all of their concerns would be kept in mind and requested she schedule a new evaluation.

A new assessment was scheduled and completed. It was found that in fact – this resident did not have dementia but needed more time to heal from their stroke. The resident also needed some adjustment to their medications. The resident was able to move into the community with support from home health services. The resident's representative and the resident are now very happy with the outcome.

# LTC Ombudsman Volunteers



Volunteer LTC Ombudsman, Jana Howard, and Deputy LTC Ombudsman, Alvin Ancheta, at the annual Fairbanks Senior Recognition Fair.

*"I am deeply committed to ensuring that senior citizens are treated with the respect and dignity they deserve. Volunteering with seniors is a passion of mine, and I want to contribute towards enhancing their quality of life in every possible way."*

-Jana Howard, Volunteer LTC Ombudsman

*"As a new volunteer, I expect my ombudsman work to improve the lives of the residents at my assigned facilities. I hope my friendly visits will brighten their days, and in helping them resolve small complaints/problems, the residents will have fewer challenges to face tomorrow."*

-Sarah Runck, Volunteer LTC Ombudsman



Deputy LTC Ombudsman, Alvin Ancheta, and Volunteer LTC Ombudsman, Mel Langdon, at the RuralCAP Conference.



*"I believe that my impact as a volunteer ombudsman brings a sense of empowerment to residents. To know someone is there for you and that you have a voice is a very powerful thing. I believe it is important that we can count on one another in our community to do that for everybody, including the most vulnerable."*

-Mónica Schwingendorf, Volunteer LTC Ombudsman

**Are you looking for a meaningful way to give back to your community? Are you friendly and have creative problem solving skills? We may have the volunteer opportunity for you!**

- **VISIT** older Alaskans, 60 years of age and older, who live in assisted living or skilled nursing homes.
- **EDUCATE** older Alaskans and their families about their rights in a facility.
- **EMPOWER** and support older Alaskans to advocate for themselves.
- Assist older Alaskans to **RESOLVE** issues and concerns.

Volunteer LTC Ombudsman Requirements:

- Complete 18 hours of classroom training and 6-10 hours of facility visits with staff.
- Complete 1 visit a month and submit a report in a timely manner.
- Give a 1 year commitment.

**Call 1-800-730-6393 or visit [akoltco.org/volunteer](http://akoltco.org/volunteer) for information and how to apply**

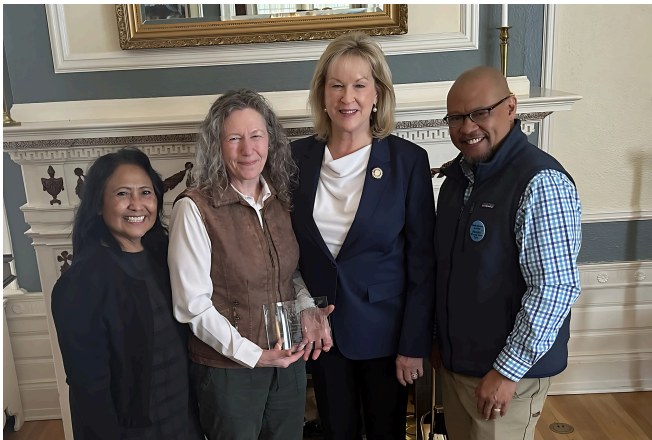
# LTC Ombudsman Volunteers

*“Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around.”*

*– Leo Buscaglia*

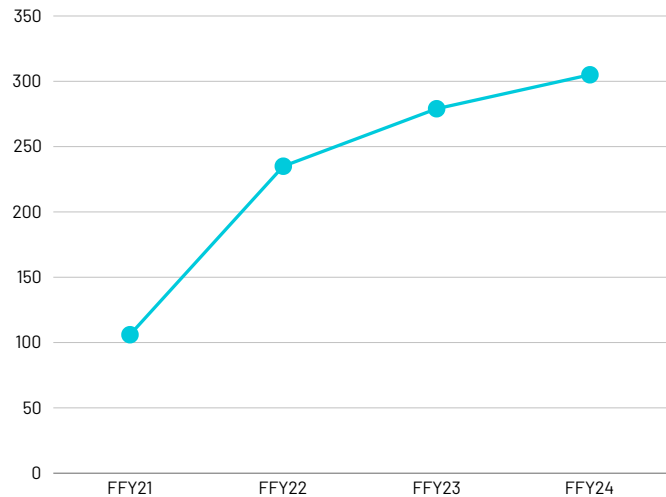
What makes volunteering so meaningful for the Office of the Long-Term Care Ombudsman program? Volunteers extend the capacity of our office to reach seniors in long term care settings. The OLTCO has amazing volunteers across Alaska who support the mission and offer a hand to enhance the well-being of seniors. Volunteering also offers a win-win opportunity. While seniors benefit from the generous time and effort of our volunteers, volunteering provides others with a sense of purpose and allows others to connect richly to their communities.

To the 25 amazing and dedicated volunteers who contributed 305 hours of their most precious time to enrich the lives of seniors – the OLTCO program offers our thanks and gratitude to the work that you do everyday to make a difference in the lives of seniors.



Alaska First Lady's 2024 Volunteer Award recipient, Margaret Varlamos

Number of Volunteer Hours



## Thank You to Our Amazing Volunteers:

- Brandon Lowe
- Cortney Bramwell
- Darcey Sharp
- Deborah
- Elisabeth Claus
- Jana Howard
- Janet Long
- Jeanne Berger
- Joe Morgan
- Joyce Courtney
- Karl Reiche
- Laurie Ann Lavinge
- Malia Hayward
- Malan Paquette
- Martina Tassie
- Mónica Schwingendorf
- Mel Langdon
- Sarah Runck
- Taylor Rukes
- Jeanne Berger
- Carl Gressel
- Rebecca Gundunas
- Margaret Varlamos
- Marcia Watson
- Victoria Winne



OLTCO Annual Volunteer Appreciation, August 2024

# Case Story

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## Case Story #3

An ombudsman recently became involved in a case where a deceased resident's representative faced ongoing challenges in obtaining a refund for an advanced payment made to an assisted living home (ALH). After the resident had passed, the representative made multiple requests to the facility's administrator for a refund of the unused portion of the payment, as well as a copy of the signed residential services contract (RSC) to which they were entitled to. However, the administrator's responses were inconsistent, offering vague assurances that the matter would be investigated but failing to follow up or provide the requested contract. Ultimately, the administrator informed the representative that the payment was nonrefundable based on the signed residential services contract, which had not been produced. Frustrated with the lack of resolution, the representative felt caught in a cycle of delays and excuses.

Recognizing that their efforts were not leading to an appropriate or reasonable outcome, the representative sought out assistance from the OLTCO. The ombudsman reviewed the situation and identified potential concerns with how the facility was handling the refund request and its failure to provide the required documentation. Despite the administrator's communication with the representative, the absence of clear, actionable answers and unavailability of the signed RSC, raised concerns of potential regulatory issues.

The ombudsman stepped in, reaching out directly to the ALH administrator. The communication clearly outlined the regulations regarding refunds after the passing of a resident. It also emphasized the importance of the facility's responsibility to provide a copy of the signed residential services contract. The communication highlighted the need for compliance with these requirements and urged the facility to take immediate action.

Following this intervention, the administrator ultimately agreed to issue a partial refund, marking the first tangible outcome after weeks of vague assurances. Although the full refund requested was not granted, the issue of a partial refund represented a shift in the administrator's previous lack of follow-through. The ombudsman had successfully moved the case forward, ensuring that the representative was no longer left without answers.

In addition to securing the partial refund, the case was referred for further review through the submission of a critical incident report. This step ensured that the facility's practices surrounding refunds, as well as its failure to provide the signed RSC as required by regulations, would be examined more closely for any broader regulatory issues that may need to be addressed.

While the representative had initially encountered significant roadblocks in seeking resolution, the intervention of the OLTCO broke the stalemate, illustrating how persistence and commitment can drive meaningful progress. Even when the situation initially seemed to have stalled, the decision to seek additional support from the OLTCO helped shed light on the issue and prompt action, demonstrating the value of advocacy and oversight in protecting both residents and their families within long-term care settings.

# Systems Advocacy

## Issue: Resident Rights

Residents' rights have been in the top five complaints for both nursing homes and assisted living facilities for the last ten years. While the OLTCO team makes a concerted effort to share resources about residents' rights during facility visits, resident council meetings, and resident support and care planning meetings, complaints about residents' rights remain in the top five category of complaints.

## Barriers

The population of older adults in Alaska continues to grow. Seniors who move into long-term care settings should be able to maintain their human and civil rights. While both federal and state law promote residents' rights, staff in long term care must be constantly informed about honoring residents' rights. Residents should continuously be educated about their rights so that they can enjoy the highest quality of their life. A quote from one resident during a facility visit indicated that she was not aware of her rights as a resident: "If you don't know you have rights, then you operate under the assumption that you don't have any rights."

The OLTCO visits all long-term care facilities in Alaska once/twice annually to share resources, listen to complaints and inform residents about their rights. Many of our communities in Alaska are not accessible by road, thereby limiting OLTCO's travel to off road communities. With this challenge, it is difficult to visit with residents every month or quarter in long-term care settings. The OLTCO must explore creative ways to maintain communication and connections with residents in long term facilities across our large state.

## Resolution

During FFY 2024, the OLTCO facilitated a residents' rights virtual educational forum during residents' rights month for skilled nursing facilities, assisted living homes and residents attending adult day programs. The OLTCO initially sent letters and flyers to administrators/facilities as well as shared the link to the virtual residents' rights educational forum. We also posted the upcoming invitation on social media. We informed care coordinators and family members about the virtual educational forum on residents' rights.

The OLTCO held two live virtual events in October 2023, which is residents' rights month: one for skilled nursing facilities on October 1st, and another for residential care communities on October 2nd. During the live virtual event, the OLTCO provided an introduction to the Ombudsman's Office, shared information about residents rights month/theme - (the power of my voice), discussed what rights are and highlighted important rights such as: voting rights, the right to dignity and respect, right to choices, right to be informed, right to manage finances, right to make complaints, right to remain in the facility and focused on the idea of receiving person-centered care. The OLTCO also gave space for residents to ask questions. Additionally, these educational forums were recorded and posted on the OLTCO website. The recordings were also sent to volunteers, administrators of assisted living homes and nursing facilities to assist with training staff and informing residents, volunteers and administrators.

The OLTCO intends to make this an annual virtual live event during residents' rights month, with the goal of supporting and encouraging residents to exercise their rights in long-term care living environments.

# Strengthening Our Work in FFY 2025

## Priorities for the FFY 2025:

- Continue to advocate for the rights of seniors in long-term care facilities.
- Ensure that 85%-90% of complaints are resolved to the satisfaction of the resident.
- Increase OLTCO’s presence on social media.
- Advocate for increased program funding to fund one new full-time permanent position for the OLTCO.
- Continue to strengthen relationships with local, state, and national partnerships.
- Continue to strengthen system advocacy efforts.
- Assist in the development of more resident and family councils.
- Recruit 15 new volunteers.
- Enhance advocacy training for OLTCO volunteers.
- Continue timely response to requests for information, assistance, and complaint investigations.
- Host annual virtual educational forum on residents’ rights.

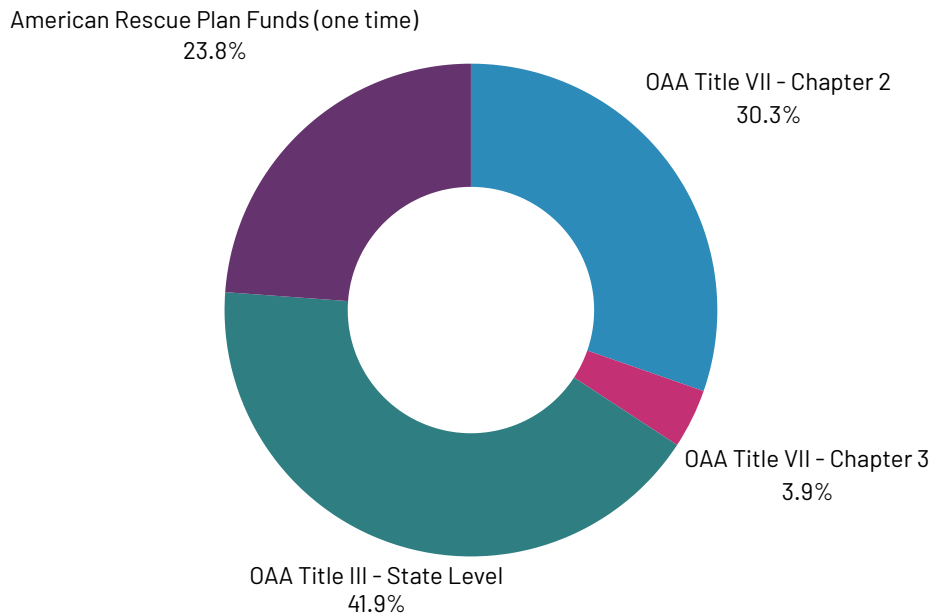


Deputy LTC Ombudsman, Alvin Ancheta, and LTC Volunteer, Cortney Bramwell, at the Mat-Su Veterans Resource Fair.



Carol Scott, Manager LTC Ombudsman Program & Policy, Deputy LTC Ombudsman, Alvin Ancheta, and State LTC Ombudsman, Stephanie Wheeler, at the National Consumer Voice Conference September 2024

## How Are Ombudsman Services Funded?



The Office of the Long-Term Care Ombudsman is housed within the Department of Revenue – Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority. Funding comes from the Older Americans Act, Title VII and Title III programs and State of Alaska, general funds. Additionally, in FFY 2024, the Office received one-time funding from the Administration for Community Living - American Rescue Plan (ARP) to hire a temporary staff person to complete additional facility visits.



# Long-Term Care Ombudsman Code of Ethics



The Ombudsman provides services with respect for human dignity and the individuality of the client, unrestricted by considerations of age, social or economic status, personal characteristics, or lifestyle choices.



The Ombudsman respects and promotes the client's right to self-determination.



The Ombudsman makes every reasonable effort to ascertain and act in accordance with the client's wishes.



The Ombudsman acts to protect vulnerable individuals from abuse and neglect.



The Ombudsman safeguards the client's right to privacy by protecting confidential information.



The Ombudsman remains knowledgeable in areas relevant to the long-term care system, especially regulatory and legislative information, and long-term care service options.



The Ombudsman acts in accordance with the standards and practices of the Long Term Care Ombudsman Program, and with respect for the policies of the sponsoring organization.



The Ombudsman will provide professional advocacy services unrestricted by his/her personal belief or opinion.



The Ombudsman participates in efforts to promote a quality, long-term care system.



The Ombudsman participates in efforts to maintain and promote the integrity of the Long Term Care Ombudsman Program.



The Ombudsman supports a strict conflict of interest standard that prohibits any financial interest in the delivery or provision of nursing home, board, and care services, or other long-term care services that are within their scope of involvement.



The Ombudsman shall conduct themselves in a manner that will strengthen the statewide and national ombudsman network.

# Protecting Residents' Rights

Residents in long-term care facilities have certain protections under state and federal law that include:

A resident has the right to file complaints with any individual or agency and recommend changes in policies, home rules, and services of the home without intimidation, retaliation, or threat of discharge.

A resident may not be discriminated against because of race, color, religious creed, disability, handicap, ancestry, sexual orientation, national origin, age, or sex.

A resident may not be neglected, intimidated, physically or verbally abused, mistreated, subjected to corporal punishment. or disciplined in any way.

A resident shall be treated with respect.

A resident has the right to self-determination and choice.

A resident shall have access to a telephone in the home to make calls in private.

A resident has the right to receive and send mail.

A resident has the right to practice the religion or faith of their choice, or not to practice any religion or faith.

A resident has the right to manage their own financial affairs.

A resident has the right to communicate privately with and access the long-term care Ombudsman.

A resident has the right to access, review and request corrections to the resident's record.

A resident shall be free from restraints.

A resident has the right to privacy of self and possessions.

A resident has the right to visit with family and friends.

A resident has the right to access the internet.

A resident has the right to participate in activities inside and outside of the facility.

A resident has the right to decide how they will be cared for and to receive all the services agreed upon in their plan of care or support plan.





## Contact Us:



3745 Community Park Loop Suite 200  
Anchorage, AK 99508



907-334-4480 or 1-800-730-6393



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