

PEERs advocate and empower residents of long-term care facilities

In 2002, the Pennsylvania State Office of Long Term Care expanded its efforts to train and certify volunteer ombudsmen to include the residents of long term care facilities. These resident volunteers are trained by staff ombudsmen to act as Pennsylvania Empowered Expert Residents (PEERs), advocating and asserting rights for themselves and fellow residents. (Additional information on the ombudsman program is available in the [February 2017](#) edition of DHS News.)

“When addressing a concern, a familiar, friendly peer offering support through the process can make a tremendous difference,” said Dennis Govachini, ombudsman/volunteer ombudsman and PEER coordinator in the Area Agency on Aging (AAA). “Knowing that your neighbor is a PEER who can help you to identify the resources needed to solve your problem can be much easier than trying to navigate the system yourself.”

Long-term care residents who volunteer with PEER commit to completing five weeks of training facilitated by the full-time ombudsman assigned to their facility. After the training is completed, PEERs participate in a graduation ceremony hosted at their facility. The PEERs are encouraged to invite their friends and family members, as well as facility staff, to the ceremony which is celebrated as a significant accomplishment by each participating PEER.

In Allegheny County, there are 22 trained PEERs in seven facilities. In one facility, PEERs recently held a car cruise as part of their efforts to integrate into the larger surrounding community. The event was attended by more than 300 community members who came to see the classic cars and meet facility residents. In another facility, PEERs advocated for a community book mobile to serve both staff and residents of the facility.

“PEER gives residents a sense of purpose and pride,” Dennis continued. “A lot of our PEERs say that they are no longer just living in a facility, they are helping others and building a sense of community both inside and outside the facility. It’s an awesome responsibility, but this program truly benefits everyone involved.”

To learn more about the PEER program, please contact Dennis at 412-350-5791.