

Combatting the Fear of Retaliation in Long-Term Care Facilities

We've all likely been in a situation where we were afraid to speak up because we thought doing so might make others treat us differently or just make the problem worse. Now imagine you're afraid to speak up about things significantly impacting the medical and personal care you receive, as well as your day-to-day quality of life. Unfortunately, residents and family members regularly tell long-term care ombudsmen that they're afraid to contact us for help because they're worried about how facility staff might treat them if they find out.

This can happen in a variety of ways, but some of the things we've heard and witnessed include issuance of involuntary discharge notices and staff not wanting to provide care to residents who talk with their ombudsman. As the State Ombudsman, I have personally talked with residents and family members who are afraid to identify themselves or the home they live in. Even though they are promised confidentiality when they contact us, some still do not want us to act because out of fear of retaliation.

But there are ways to combat this fear of retaliation in the home where you work. Residents always maintain the right to voice their grievances and recommend change to how the facility operates without restraint, interference, coercion, discrimination, or reprisal. And it falls to facilities to inform residents of procedures in place to voice such grievances, as well as to make complaints confidentially.

Creating a culture in the home where residents and their loved ones can speak openly about issues and concerns and engage in meaningful, regular discussions about care can go a long way to prevent these feelings. And letting them know that they have an advocate (which many of you do!) that can assist is critical. Don't wait for residents to say something but regularly and frequently consult with residents about their experiences and changes they would like to see.

Providing tools to strengthen resident and family councils can also go along way in sending the message that you want residents and families to feel empowered to share, and also build a better community for all residents and staff.

October is Residents' Rights Month and the theme for 2024 is **The Power of My Voice** which emphasizes self-empowerment and recognizes the power of residents being vocal about their interests, personal growth, and right to live full, enriching lives. Learn more here: The [National Consumer Voice for Quality Long-Term Care \(theconsumervoicetn.org\)](https://theconsumervoicetn.org) This is a great time to tackle the possible fear of retaliation in the home where you work!

Need to speak to your district ombudsman? Find their contact information here: [District Long-Term Care Ombudsman \(tn.gov\)](https://www.tn.gov/ombudsman) You can reach me at teresa.teeple@tn.gov