

October is Residents' Rights Month: Let's Celebrate Assertive Aging

By Cathy Ode, LTC Ombudsman Program Manager

As we age, we learn to embrace our interdependence. It might take longer to complete tasks we used to find simple. Many of us find we need more assistance than in the past, from help with household chores to advocacy for our rights as patients or as nursing home residents. With every passing year, there are more and more complicated forms to complete. Technology continues to evolve and sometimes these rapid changes can feel intimidating. Cleaning that bathtub becomes a real chore. Sometimes it's hard to know where to turn for help.

We all need help from time to time. If you stop and think about it, we always have. There's no shame in accepting assistance when needed, whether it's a temporary issue or a "new normal." Accepting in-home services like home-delivered meals, grocery shopping, or laundry service through ESCCI's Home Care department means remaining safely at home for as long as possible. This is especially important here on Cape Cod, where so many of us have no family nearby. . . not to mention all those steep basement stairs down to the washer and dryer! It takes strength to acknowledge our weaknesses.

We sometimes fear that by accepting help in certain areas of our lives, we are giving up the power to make our own decisions across the board. Nothing could be further from the truth. Our rights to autonomy and privacy remain as important as ever, even as we accept changing circumstances. And it becomes increasingly important as we age to understand our rights and how to assert them.

For example, a nursing home resident has the right to receive visitors on a 24-hour basis, as long as they are respectful of others in the facility. If a resident's adult child works a crazy schedule and can only visit after typical visiting hours, the facility must accommodate this visit. After all, the skilled nursing facility is now that resident's home. Their child *should* be able to stop by after work just as they did when Mom or Dad was in the family home.

Another example of residents' rights is the simple act of allowing someone to enter their room. There should always be a knock on the door and a request to enter. It's a simple courtesy that should be extended to all nursing home residents.

People sometimes worry about the consequences of asserting their rights. It's understandable that a nursing home resident or family member might worry that standing up for their rights – or even making simple requests - might lead to retribution from staff. But among residents' many rights is the ability to make requests, and even file grievances when necessary, without fear of retaliation or any other negative consequences. Assertiveness means being aware of our rights as well as our responsibilities, and being able to advocate for oneself.

Each skilled nursing facility, rest home, and assisted living facility on the Cape and Islands has an assigned Ombudsman who makes a weekly visit. During those visits and during monthly Resident Council meetings, Ombudsmen make sure [residents understand their rights](#) and assist when issues arise. Moving into an assisted living or skilled nursing facility or a rest home doesn't mean residents give up their autonomy. And their privacy is just as important as ever. For more information about the Long-Term Care Ombudsman program, please contact me at 508-364-4630 ext. 501.

While support is often needed as we age, we should feel comfortable being assertive and knowledgeable about what we need and don't need. We should always expect to have our privacy respected by service providers. All the staff at Elder Services know that and will can help you find the best way to assert your rights when accessing aging services. Let us partner with you and your loved ones in assertive aging!