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## Feature Article

## Utilizing online tools to increase volunteer ombudsmen presence in long-term care

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## ABSTRACT

In this descriptive study, former and current volunteer ombudsmen ( $n = 65$ ) completed an online survey and Chi-square analyses were used to determine group differences in order to examine the impact of internet-based communication on the recruitment and retention of volunteer long-term care ombudsmen. The results showed that the program's shift to internet-based recruitment and communication methods helped increase the number of volunteers by 50% and contributed to a positive shift in role perception and satisfaction. Consequently, the proliferation of internet and social media usage permits greater volunteer management opportunities than previously were available. These tools also allow for consistency of message, extended training opportunities, and recourse to resources at need which permit ombudsmen volunteers to identify more readily with the role of resident advocate and receive greater performance satisfaction as it relates to that role.

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## Introduction

The United States has 15,700 nursing homes that combined offers 1,669,100 beds.<sup>1</sup> The average length of stay is 835 days.<sup>2</sup> To protect the rights of residents in long-term care facilities, the Ombudsman Program was established within the Older Americans Act in 1972.<sup>3</sup> Ombudsmen help to protect the health, safety, welfare and rights of residents and work to improve the quality of care.<sup>4</sup> As such, they complement efforts of federal and state regulatory staff.<sup>5</sup> Because regulatory agencies have limited resources for overseeing and enforcing quality of care, ombudsmen work with facility personnel to help resolve residents' problems and improve residents' quality of life.

The Ombudsman Program in most states relies heavily upon volunteers,<sup>6</sup> unpaid workers who give of their time and services. The Administration on Aging reports that the program has 1186 full-time staff and 9065 volunteers.<sup>3</sup> With nearly 38,000 nursing and assisted living facilities nationwide to cover, recruitment and retention of volunteers are essential elements of program management, and has historically been problematic for many programs nationwide.<sup>7</sup> In Harris County alone the residents of 95 nursing facilities could benefit from the weekly visits of a volunteer ombudsman, but even with recent significant increases in

volunteer numbers, an average of 25% of the facilities do not have an assigned volunteer. To identify factors that impact recruitment, retention, and barriers to ongoing participation, we surveyed past and present volunteers currently residing in a greater metropolitan area.

In addition, we compared perceptions of current volunteers to those in a similar study of like volunteers that was conducted in 2004.<sup>7</sup> Having results from the two studies permits consideration of differences and trends within the same ombudsman program over the 10 years separating the two studies, and allowed us to explore some potential consequences of changes made to recruitment and communication strategies. We anticipated that we would find a direct correlation between the increase in numbers of volunteers in recent years and the move to internet-based approaches.

## Materials and methods

An investigator-generated, 20 question survey with space for open input was presented online using Zoomerang's survey format (see [www.zoomerrang.com](http://www.zoomerrang.com)). The survey followed the structure of the earlier study in 2004 and as such, focused on roles, perceived performance and volunteer satisfaction. The present study, however, included two questions concerning internet and social media usage that were not present on the earlier questionnaire. The intent was to use responses from volunteers who had dropped from the program (former) and those who were active at the time of data

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**Table 1**  
Survey questions.

	Question	Potential responses
1	What is your status as a volunteer?	Currently certified; intern; former
2	How did you originally hear about the ombudsman program?	Internet/online, chronicle/newspaper; individual (word-of-mouth); ombudsman program giveaways, posters, or pamphlets; library postcard; other
3	What inspired you to become an ombudsman?	Education/skills/background; desire to help elderly/disabled (community service); had a friend, family member in a nursing home; other
4	What can we do as staff ombudsmen to better support you and the work you do? (Select only one.)	Distribute a newsletter; improve our website; provide more opportunities for interaction with other ombudsmen; keep doing what we're doing; provide more email news items/direct communication; create a single source for relevant program information; assign more than one volunteer per location/create CVO teams; conduct more continuing education events; have CVO mentors for new volunteers; other
5	What do you like least about being a volunteer ombudsman? (Please check all that apply.)	Seeing suffering/mistreatment; always wishing you could give more; submitting the monthly report; getting resistance from facilities to progress and change; trying to explain "ombudsman" to people; having people no-show for appointments; losing residents to death; noticing apathy from staff or family; nothing, you enjoy it all; other
6	What do you like most about being a volunteer ombudsman? (Please check all that apply.)	Making a difference/helping others; interacting with residents; solving problems; having flexibility in your schedule; receiving ongoing training; meeting people who care about others; other
7	With which role of an ombudsman do you most readily identify?	Friendly visitor; mediator; advocate
8	Do you feel adequately rewarded for your work as an ombudsman?	Yes; no
9	On a scale of 1–10, with 10 being the most and 1 being the least, please indicate how effective you feel you are as an ombudsman in regards to advocating on behalf of the residents in your assigned facility?	1 through 10
10	What do you see as the biggest challenge to your effectiveness as an ombudsman?	Resistance from administrators; resistance from other nursing home staff; lack of legal authority; voluntary nature of the ombudsman role; physical/mental condition of residents; inadequate program funding; inadequate training; lack of support from program staff
11	For each of the categories below, please indicate whether or not you feel successful as an ombudsman:	Protecting resident rights; resolving resident complaints; improving day-to-day life of residents; preventing recurrence of inadequate care; resolving food issues; resolving administration issues; resolving interpersonal relations issues; resolving staffing issues
12	Have you ever had a loved one in a: (Check all that apply.)	Nursing home; assisted living community
13	Would you recommend volunteering as an ombudsman to others?	Yes; no
14	Which if any of the following do you ever use? (Please check all that apply.)	Internet; Facebook; Twitter; LinkedIn; Google+ (the social media application, not the search engine); Pinterest; YouTube; other social media site(s)
15	In which year did you become a volunteer ombudsman?	Any
16	Age	18–34; 35–54; 55–64; 65+
17	Gender	Female; male
18	Employment status	Retired; part-time; full-time; student; other, please specify
19	Race/Ethnicity	Asian; Black; Hispanic; white; other, please specify
20	Education	High school; Associate's degree/Trade school; Bachelor's degree; Graduate degree

collection (current) to gain insight into volunteer motivation and likes or dislikes of the program. Approval to conduct the study was obtained from appropriate county officials and granted by the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects.

### Sample

Individuals who were volunteers between 2010 and 2012 were invited to participate in the survey. Of the 131 potential candidates, 126 (73 current and 53 former) had valid email addresses. The participation rate was 52% ( $n = 66$ ) and consisted of 47 current and 17 former volunteers (two respondents did not indicate former or current status).

### Survey

Respondents completed the online questionnaire by checking appropriate boxes, either in an all that apply, yes or no, or multiple-choice format. The questions asked participants to identify how they heard about the program, what motivated them to become ombudsmen, what staff ombudsmen can do to better to support

them in their role as ombudsmen, what they liked best and least about being ombudsmen, and their perceived role and satisfaction with the program. The questions and possible responses are shown in Table 1.

Potential respondents were sent a brief introduction via email that explained the purpose of the research and provided a link to the actual survey. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were guaranteed anonymity. A reminder notice with the original introduction was sent after seven days. After 14 days, the survey was closed, and the initial results were downloaded into a database. The investigators used a numerical coding system to de-identify responses.

### Statistical analyses

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize sample demographic characteristics. Chi-square tests were calculated to determine differences between current and former volunteers. The Mann–Whitney  $U$  test was used when data was ordinal (e.g. education). As the study is descriptive,  $p$  values  $\leq .05$  were considered significant. Statistical analysis was conducted with IBM SPSS Statistics, version 20.

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