

Reflections on Starting & Sustaining Family Councils

Starting a Family Council

When Elizabeth Yeh worked as a Long Term Care Ombudsman, she helped start a family council in the nursing home she served. She found CANHR's material on how to start a Family Council in a SNF very helpful. Here's a brief summary of what she did.

After Ms. Yeh got to know all the residents and their family members, one of the family members who had an on-going, unsolved problem with the facility stated that some other family members also ran into the same situations. "This was my opportunity to say: why not get together and form a family council?" Ms. Yeh volunteered to act as the liaison between the family council and the facility's administration. She asked several families to set up a date, time and place for the first meeting, then approached the administrator, who offered to put up an announcement on their front door to notify all families."

"We held our first meeting in the facility with 3 families attending. They elected a temporary president, a vice-president and asked me to act as the secretary/liaison. Gradually, more family members attended." She reports that at the third meeting, the convening place was relocated to the Yolo county social service department and there was a good turnout of families. Problems were identified and given to Administrator for him to reply in writing within 10 days. The response letter from the Administrator was then presented and discussed at the next meeting, and accepted or to sent back for clarification or a more meaningful response. This process of written requests and critical review and discussion of administration responses developed into some fruitful exchanges. For subsequent meetings, the members decided to invite department heads to come to talk to them. Ms. Yeh reports that some of the activities-of-daily-living problems decreased and that residents' quality of life and care also improved. "As for me as an Ombudsman, my caseload decreased as family members became more empowered and effective in their own advocacy."

You don't have to be an Ombudsman to start a family council but an Ombudsman can be a good resource for any family council by offering support and providing information and education on resident rights. Contact the Ombudsman assigned to the facility where your loved one lives and ask how they can help either start or sustain your Family Council.

Sustaining Family Councils

Colleen Adams, featured in the Winter 2011 edition of *The Advocate*, has been involved with Family Councils since 1998. She has taken on about every care issue that residents face. Over these 14 years, she has also learned a thing or two about organizing and sustaining Family Councils.

In a recent interview, Ms. Adams said that one of the most important things is to try to get the administrator to work with the Family Council. She offered this reflection: "Find areas of mutual concern, e.g. complaints of serving cold food, and come up with shared solutions. Also remind the administrator of past successes when working together to solve new problems."

An on-going challenge is recruiting new members as people come and go from the Family Council. Colleen passes out Family Council brochures to family and friends of new residents, often times by handing them out room to room. Besides maintaining an informative bulletin board with take away materials (e.g. Family Council brochure, resident rights, etc.), she creates five feet long banners announcing special speakers for upcoming family council meetings that really get people's attention. The facility also sends out notices of family council meetings in the monthly billing.

In this facility, the Family Council has created a "buddy system" where members look in on one another's loved ones, especially when family members are away. These acts of kindness are real demonstrations of support and solidarity. As one of the Family Council members said, "It gives me peace of mind when I have to go on a trip knowing that someone from the Family Council is looking in on my spouse."

Tell us about your successes and challenges in starting or sustaining Family Councils so we can share your stories.

Obtain a free DVD on Organizing Family Councils and download

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or order an Organizing Guide to Family Councils in Long Term Care Facilities

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