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Ombudsman helps with care problems

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Circumstances have separated James and Janet Holt, but it hasn't divided them.

James Holt still breaks down when he talks about the decision to move his wife of 40 years into a nursing home.

But he said he couldn't handle her anymore. Janet Holt's schizophrenia was endangering the Parma couple.

"She really didn't have a problem until 1992," he said. "Up until then she worked as an LPN [licensed practical nurse]. We have a good marriage, three children."

"We'd be lying in the bed and she'd grab me by the throat, or we'd be driving down the road and she'd try to get out or grab the wheel," Holt said. "It got worse and worse and worse."

And the effects of the multiple medications had left her with balance and other problems similar to Parkinson's disease. She also has diabetes.

Holt met his wife while she was a student nurse at Lakewood Hospital. He was there with a bad back after getting out of the Marine Corps.

"I thought as we got older, she would take care of me," he said. "It didn't work out that way."

Holt said his 61-year-old wife moved into the Greenbrier Health Care Center in nearby Parma Heights in the fall of 2004. The location was ideal because it was close by for her mother, her sister, their daughter and him to visit.

However, last year, the state told the 65-year-old Holt that his wife didn't need nursing home care and so Medicaid would no longer pay for it. The Holts can't afford the nursing home on their own.

Holt said he didn't know what to do and first went to Legal Aid to ask for help.

They told him about the Long Term Care Ombudsman program. The advocacy program, mandated by the federal government in 1978, helps families and patients in nursing homes.

There are 12 regional programs across the state.

The Cleveland office - one of 33 agencies to benefit from the Plain Dealer Charities Holiday Spirit campaign - works with residents from Lorain, Cuyahoga, Lake, Geauga and Medina counties.

The No. 1 complaint in Ohio is from patients being asked to leave nursing homes, either by the nursing home or because the state of Ohio says the person doesn't need the care and denies Medicaid coverage, said director Debbie Allen.

"No other state has this as their first complaint," Allen said.

Holt said ombudsman office employees, as well as the nursing home, came to the hearing to represent him and his wife.

"It was a good thing we had the long-term care ombudsman," Holt said. "They presented it like a legal case."

Holt breaks down again when he talks about the possibility of his wife moving back with him.

"I don't think Janet will ever be able to come home," he said. "Her short-term memory is bad. She'll ask the same question over and over and over again."

Holt goes every day, usually eating two meals with her, and takes her to physical therapy.

"I change her clothes, I like to bring them home and wash them," he said. "I try to be involved as much as I can."

"She's been an extremely good wife. I love her to pieces, and she loves me."

For more information about Long Term Care Ombudsman, call (216)696-2719 or go to www.ltco.org. The Plain Dealer's Holiday Spirit stories are available online at www.cleveland.com/holidayspirit.

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