

Finding a voice for the voiceless

November 23, 2009

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Have you ever shared a hospital room or nursing home with an ailing senior citizen who never received any visits from family, friends or even clergy?

Didn't you wonder how this person's "people" could allow their loved one to be left alone in such a condition? Or who would make crucial decisions on their behalf regarding health care, legal matters or estate planning?

how To help

Contact Northwest Indiana Adult Guardianship Services at 985-6566, or e-mail niags_teddy@yahoo.com, or visit www.niags.org.

What they do

The organization provides services related to temporary and permanent guardianship of the client and their estate, as well as these legal services: power of attorney, health care representative, money manager, representative payee and Veterans Administration fiduciary. Additional group efforts include training volunteers, raising public awareness and offering education services about adult guardianship issues.

save the date

Northwest Indiana Adult Guardianship Services Inc. and the American Culinary Federation Chefs of Northwest Indiana are planning a fundraiser, Adventures in International Cuisine, on Jan. 28 at Avalon Manor in Hobart.

I recently visited a friend in the hospital whose roommate fit this description -- no guests, no loved ones and seemingly no personal relationships beyond the endless rotation of nurses.

The elderly man in the next bed simply slept, sighed in pain or blankly stared at the television. He barely even conversed with the nurses.

"The poor guy has no one to speak up for him," my friend whispered to me.

A week after this hospital visit I coincidentally met with someone whose mission is to help people in that guy's exact situation. His name is Teddy Flores, executive director of Northwest Indiana Adult Guardianship Services.

Flores' new not-for-profit organization provides guardianship and related services for incapacitated adults when other resources, or family members, are not available.

"We're here to fill that void for people who can't speak up for themselves," he told me. "There are more people in this situation than you might think."

Flores didn't have to sell me on this notion or the need for his agency. I see such people all the time in my daily orbit across this region. Many of these residents are victims of our society's quiet epidemic -- loneliness. I see it everywhere. Do you, too?

As the Beatles so aptly put it, "All the lonely people, where do they all come from? All the lonely people, where do they all belong?"

During my public presentations, I often recite two telling statistics about this issue.

First, the U.S. Census Bureau's latest figures state that one-fourth of all American households are comprised of just one person. That's it. Just one. Compare that with figures from a half-century ago, showing that only one in 10 households was comprised of just one person.

Secondly, the American Sociological Review published a major study showing that the average American gets through life with only two close friends. Yes, just two friends whom they confide in and with whom they share intimate details about their life.

A similar study from 20 years earlier showed we had, on average, three such friends.

My point: More people are living alone, some willingly and happily. Others, not so much. Plus, more people are living with fewer friendships and family connections, which leads me back to adult guardianship issues.

In this country, there's an estimated 400,000 open cases involving adult guardianship, according to the National Guardianship Association. In this state, there are roughly 6,700 similar cases involving such clients, their property and their future.

In this region, the group Volunteer Advocates for Seniors, or VAS, has 26 open cases, yet Flores' new group has only a handful of such cases for its 30 or so volunteers.

I'm convinced there are dozens, if not hundreds more cases out there in Northwest Indiana, and this is where you come into play.

Do you know someone 18 years or older who is determined by a doctor to be incapacitated due to a medical, mental, developmental or physical condition? Or someone adjudicated to be incapacitated by a court with probate jurisdiction?

Or, more simply, someone who has no one to speak on their behalf?

If so, maybe Flores' group can help them.

"Our goal is to provide services in the least restrictive manner and with the utmost respect for a client's value and dignity," he said. "We believe that our volunteer guardians, attorneys and professional staff can effectively serve as their advocates."

In other words, they can be the voice for the voiceless. Yes, it's an old wrinkled adage in the newspaper industry, but it's still one of my favorite things to do as a columnist.

Visit Jerry's blog at <http://blogs.post-trib.com/davich/>, his Facebook, and Twitter at @jdavich.

Source: Post Tribune