



NEWS RELEASE

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Advocates For Conserved Elders Work To Reduce Alarming Incidence Of Abuse, Neglect Among California's Conserved Elders

SANTA MONICA (Oct. 5, 2009) - Despite her advanced years, Charlotte is sharp, clear-headed and known to speak her mind. Sadly, these qualities didn't save her from becoming the victim of an unscrupulous caregiver, who drained her assets and left her nearly destitute. Charlotte had no family or friends to protect her interests and, as a result, was placed under conservatorship by the Los Angeles Superior Court. Today, she has a trusted and caring friend in Linda Louie, a volunteer with ACE (Advocates for Conserved Elders), a volunteer-based program run by WISE & Healthy Aging in collaboration with the Los Angeles Superior Court Probate Division.

"Charlotte's story is all too common," says Grace Cheng Braun, president and CEO of WISE & Healthy Aging.

Indeed, according to the California Attorney General's Crime and Violence Prevention Center, an estimated one in 20 elders is a victim of neglect and/or physical, psychological or financial abuse. California holds the dubious distinction of ranking No. 1 in reports of elder abuse among adults over age 60. Even more shocking is the fact that 90 percent of perpetrators are family members, reports the National Center on Elder Abuse.

"Generally, a senior is assigned a court-appointed conservator, when they are deemed unable to care for themselves or their affairs. This conservator can be a family member, a friend or the public guardian," explains WISE & Healthy Aging's Laraine Mestman, who manages the ACE program.

These court-appointed conservators have complete access to, control of and responsibility for their client's lives. This may include their medical care, housing, finances, care facility and the like. Given the scope of this relationship—and inherent risks—California enacted legislation in 2006 that required greater court oversight of conservatorships to deter potential abuse or neglect.

To this end, the Los Angeles Superior Court united with Santa Monica-based WISE & Healthy Aging to launch Advocates for Conserved Elders in November 2007 with a \$235,000 grant from the California Community Foundation. To date, Mestman has trained 60 volunteers—and recruited 160 prospects—to help serve as "eyes and ears" for the court in its effort to reduce isolation, loneliness and elder abuse among nearly 9,200 conserved elders in Los Angeles County. ACE hopes to continue its mission when the initial two-year endowment expires in November 2009.

“So does the Los Angeles Superior Court, which was so impressed with ACE’s work that it nominated the program for the prestigious Ralph N. Kleps Award, which recognizes innovative programs that are transferable to other courts in the state and which provide a service to the public.”

“Other counties have visitation programs for elders, but nothing like the ACE program,” Superior Court Judge Aviva Bobb of the Probate Division states in the Kleps Award nomination. Bobb was instrumental in establishing and funding the ACE Program in coordination with WISE & Healthy Aging. “It would be a natural evolution for this program to serve as a prototype for other communities throughout the country.”

Patterned after nationally recognized CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates)—a program to safeguard young wards of the court—ACE relies on trained volunteers who make regular visits to seniors under court-ordered probate conservatorships who live in residential care or skilled nursing facilities anywhere in Los Angeles County.

“Volunteers immediately communicate any concerns or complaints involving their conservatees to the ACE office which in turn relays concerns to LASC probate investigators for follow-up,” says Mestman, who currently oversees 50 active cases. “Any issues identified are also reported to the conservator.”

The court refers conservatees considered at highest risk to the ACE coordinator who then assigns a volunteer to the case. All volunteers are thoroughly trained and screened and must commit to one year’s participation in the program. They also report the status of their conservatees in monthly reports and meetings.

Conserved elders like Charlotte aren’t the only ones reaping rewards through ACE. Volunteers also find inspiration and fulfillment through their interactions with their conservatees. Linda remembers the warmth of Charlotte’s embrace as she thanked her for stopping by, explaining that she had no visitors and no one to talk to.

For Ann Cochran, who’s been with program since its inception: “If I’m able to make any difference in someone’s life, it makes me feel good.”

Cochran was assigned to an elderly resident at a care facility who didn’t communicate verbally—a daunting challenge for some.

“It really wasn’t a problem though,” states the Santa Monica mother and grandmother. “She was a wonderful woman, and I really enjoyed my visits with her. I’d read to her and talk about the day or the weather. “We DID communicate,” she stresses.

As for Charlotte, she’s delighted to have a friend and looks forward to her twice-monthly visits from Linda, who brings shampoo, special foods and other small items when she comes. “She’s a very special person,” says Charlotte, “my best friend.”

Advocates for Conserved Elders continues to seek program volunteers as well as ongoing financial support for the program. For more information, contact Laraine Mestman, ACE program manager, at (310) 394-9871, ext. 445, or email lmestman@wiseandhealthyaging.org.

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