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**Volunteer guardians in demand
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With scarred minds and unwilling bodies, 1,400 "wards" live in nursing homes, houses and hospitals in Stark County.

They're called wards for short, as in wards of the court. They're people, often senior citizens, who can no longer make good decisions for themselves. They've been declared legally incompetent in probate court. A guardian has been appointed for each to handle his or her affairs - from haircuts to life-and-death decisions on medical treatment.

Ideally, a family member agrees to be guardian.

Those without a willing family member had few choices in the past.

Most wound up in the care of Trillium Family Solutions, a local nonprofit agency that charges fees to wards and nursing homes for its professional guardianship services.

"There were some issues there," said Stark County Probate Judge Dixie Park.

Some of those issues were outlined in a series of stories in The Repository in 2006, critical of Trillium's services.

Trillium made changes in an effort to improve, and still regularly takes on new cases. The judge, in turn, revamped the way the court handles guardianship cases.

NEW AGENCY BORN

She also sought out local elder law attorney Sandra Watkins-Cleaver for ideas to provide an alternative to Trillium.

Watkins-Cleaver created Guardian Support Services, a stand-alone nonprofit.

Its sole mission: Find volunteer guardians for indigent wards.

"It's starting to take off," Watkins-Cleaver said.

The group, which operates solely on grants and donations, has 18 active guardians, who oversee 43 wards. Over the weekend, Guardian Support Services expected to train more than a dozen new volunteers to become guardians.

"We like to say we're creating love stories," said Executive Director Diana Espenschied.

Twenty-six-year-old Alicia Chiappini, a domestic violence legal advocate for Massillon Municipal Court, volunteered less than a year ago.

"These are people who have so much to share," Chiappini said. "They've lived history, and I love to learn. My grandparents died when I was 13."

The judge said volunteers have performed well. Her favorite story is of a guardian who was present when her ward died. The ward said she was cold, so her guardian gave her a blanket minutes before she died.

"Then she smiled and told her guardian, 'I love you,' " Park recalled.

NEED TO INCREASE

A guardian is required by the court to visit a ward once a month. Volunteers, though, sometimes visit every week or more. They handle only guardian-of-person cases, which means they don't have to worry about a ward's finances. Most wards have exhausted all their money and are supported solely by Medicaid.

By not charging nursing homes for their service, guardians say they avoid a conflict of interest when it comes to their wards. Fran Dawson, a volunteer, said she considers herself an advocate to keep nursing homes on their toes, since she's liable to visit her wards at any time.

"They're always happy to see me ... that someone is listening to them, even if they just want to complain about the food," Dawson said.

Gary Smith, a retired Plain Local Schools music teacher, has volunteered from the start. He tries to attend his wards' quarterly plan-of-care meetings at the nursing homes and often has gone to the hospital to make decisions on treatment for wards.

Watkins-Cleaver, the founder, now serves as an adviser.

"She just has a heart for the elderly ... I've seen it," the judge said.

Park said the need for guardians will increase as the population ages. In Stark County, the number of guardianship cases increases 15 percent a year. The number of people age 65 and older in the U.S. is expected to double to 71 million by the year 2030.

Anyone interested in volunteering can contact Guardian Support Services at (330) 649-5502.

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