
LAKE COUNTY'S JUDGE SCHNEIDER

PIONEERS

SENIOR GUARDIAN

VOLUNTEER PROGRAM

WE MAY HAVE FIRST HAND KNOWLEDGE OF A RELATIVE OR FRIEND, WE MAY HAVE HEARD ABOUT SOMEONE FROM A FELLOW WORKER OR NEIGHBOR, OR WE MAY HAVE READ IN THE NEWS OR SEEN A REPORT ON TELEVISION ABOUT THE SPECIAL NEEDS OF OUR VULNERABLE ELDERLY POPULATION.

Many individuals are fortunate and have the mental capacity and physical strength to remain independent and self-reliant into their later years. Others, who need temporary or even long-term care, are fortunate to have a close relative or friend who can manage matters for them and provide that necessary care. But, what about the growing numbers of elderly who need help but do not have a capable spouse, child, sibling, or close friend to care for them? To whom do they turn? Where do they go? Who will be there for them?

As our population ages, so will the demands on our courts and our social agencies. In the United States, by 2030, almost 1 out of every 5 Americans—some 72 million people—will be 65 years of age or older. In Indiana, the number of people older than the age of 60 has increased 28% in the last decade. During that same time period, the general population has grown less than 10%. And in Indiana, like almost half of the states, we do not have a governmental office to provide for a public guardian for those in need.

In Hammond, Indiana, Lake County Superior Court Judge Diane Kavadias Schneider has helped pioneer a program to find, train and monitor volunteer guardians for seniors in need. It started in her city in 2001 when Saint Margaret Mercy Hospital saw a special need for at-risk, inpatient individuals over the age of 55 years. In partnership with the Lake Superior Court, the Hospital founded the Volunteer Advocates for Seniors (VAS) Program. The VAS Program is partially funded by grants from The Retirement Research Foundation, Indiana Bar Foundation, Lake County Foundation for the Retarded, Legacy Foundation, Inc., and other local, state and national funders and individual donors.

According to Judge Schneider, "the VAS program was developed to address the growing concerns within the Lake County healthcare community relating to incapacitated elderly persons in need of guardianship services. The greatest concern was for elderly persons who were hospitalized as inpatients and who



PHOTO: Andres Rodriguez

were not competent to meet their own medical and legal needs. Many of these patients had no known relatives to assist them or advocate for them.”

“The VAS program is a model program for collaborative problem solving between hospital healthcare providers and the courts”, said Judge Schneider. “Programs such as VAS show how a partnership between the courts and health care providers can better serve the needs of the elderly and the incapacitated in our community”, she added.

Vanessa Nathan, who has been with the program since its inception, is Program Manager for the VAS Program at the St. Margaret Mercy Health Care Center in Hammond. VAS provides volunteer limited guardian services for elderly persons who have no relatives or friends capable of meeting their needs and are in a hospital, nursing home, or hospice health care facility in Northwest Indiana. Volunteers must be at least 21 years of age with a good record, the ability to make sound decisions, be able to follow guidelines and instructions, be able to commit to the time required, have life or work experience with older or disabled individuals, and successfully complete the application and screening process and the 40 hour training program. Volunteers attend 10 four-hour training sessions that are held twice in the evening during the week and on Saturday morning. Training is provided three times annually in the summer, fall and winter. The session topics include legal matters, court procedures, the effects of aging, medical issues, and instructions on nursing and general health care. They also hear from individuals who provide insight into Alzheimer's disease, the Social Security Administration, and Adult Protective Services. Volunteers have face-to-face interviews, submit to background checks, and write a short autobiography and essay about their own views on the rights of the elderly.

Ms. Nathan said that she has been honored and fortunate to be able to partner with Judge Schneider. She describes the Judge as almost more like a social worker than judge in her caring for the elderly in the VAS Program. Ms. Nathan is passionate about the program and would like to see it serve as a model for other communities in our state.

Because of what was started in Hammond, and due to the efforts of a group of very caring state legislators, the Indiana General Assembly passed the Indiana Volunteer Advocates for Seniors Statute,



2006 Sworn Senior Guardians. Left to right: (back row) Kay Hosmer, Karen Hogan, Ed McHie, Sandra Locke, Geneva Jackson, Hon. Diane Schneider; (front row) Sharon Orenick, Lorraine East, Ed Dusek.

Indiana Code 29-3-8.5, which took effect on July 1, 2004. The law provides for court involvement and oversight, limited guardian appointment with investigative and fact-gathering duties, the ability to facilitate and authorize certain services as needed, and serving as an advocate for the rights of the incapacitated senior. The guardian must also submit a written report to the court.

Judge Schneider swore in the first class of 13 volunteers as statutorily authorized officers of the court. Today, less than five years later, there are almost 100 volunteers. Each guardian handles only one case at a time. The program has lost only three individuals as volunteer guardians. Two of those losses were due to employ-

ment reassignment and the other volunteer had to resign because of incapacity due to extensive back surgery. These individuals are obviously very dedicated and believe strongly in their mission.

Lake County Court Commissioner Donald Stepanovich works with Judge Schneider in the VAS Program and regularly gives pep talks to the new volunteers. He encourages and empathizes with them: “It’s easy to help a loved one who is disabled, but you aren’t going to know these people who you will be helping. I admire your commitment because you won’t

have any choice in whether the person you help is nice, someone easy to deal with, or just an old crank. You are going to be barging in unannounced into the lives of people you’ve never seen before who sometimes don’t appreciate your interference. But you and I know that this intrusion is necessary and may even be secretly yearned for. Sometimes you will get to know these strangers and become attached to them. Those of you who are too young to have become accustomed to death will find that experience especially sad. Other times you may be volunteering for someone who is in a coma and will never have even looked at you. But

these are experiences that most people never will know and that is why I say that for whatever amount of effort you put into this program you are going to see a corresponding amount of growth in the breadth of your character and life experience.”

And, when looking to the future, Judge Schneider says it best herself: “It is my hope that courts in other jurisdictions throughout Indiana will consider creating similar programs to address the needs of the elderly and the incapacitated in their communities.”

By James F. Maguire
Staff Attorney,
State Court Administration