

ADVOCATES for the VOICELESS

Johnson County VASIA volunteers provide guardianship to change the lives of incapacitated adults



Members of the board of Johnson County VASIA, from left to right: Peter Jessen, Cathy Ladd, Kimberly Smith and Lauren Rynerson (Judge, Kevin Barton, is pictured in the middle); and Linda Krueger, David Heidenreich, Joe Erickson and Sam Rhodes. (Photo by Tony Frampton)

Imagine developing a health condition which makes it unsafe for you to live on your own, incapable of making decisions for yourself. That leaves you in a nursing facility, alone, as you have either no family left or your family lives too far away.

That's where Johnson County VASIA steps in. This nonprofit trains volunteers and helps advocate for seniors and incapacitated adults.

In their shoes

"When I do this, I put myself in their place and their shoes," said Cathy Ladd, a volunteer and Center Grove resident. "I think if I were incapacitated, what would I want? These people have no one looking out for them and rooting for them, which is why they're in this program. Now they have one person. They know they're gonna look out for them and that is huge."

Johnson County VASIA began in November 2016. Joe Erickson, of Franklin, had retired from the Johnson County Department of Public Services in 2015. After three months off, he went back to work as a court representative/investigator until the opportunity arose to start this organization.

"When I was in high school, I started working with Johnson Memorial hospital," Erickson said. "I continued that in a part-time basis for about 10 years ... I worked on a ward, which had a lot of nursing home patients that had come up with some problems. I had contact with a lot of seniors and incapacitated people. I kind of knew what their plight was, their frustrations and their need for someone to make decisions for them if they didn't have anybody else."

The program began with a 10-person board of directors, Erickson as director, and has grown to include approximately 25 volunteers with 30 "protected people." As they continue to receive more referrals for people in need of help, the need for volunteers increases. Those interested can call Erickson at (317) 346-4414.

"Each volunteer usually brings a special strongpoint with them," Erickson said. "You have to have the ability to not take it home with you too much yet have empathy for the folks in a sense of wanting to help."

A labor of love

David Heidenreich, a Center Grove resident, is a retired clinical social worker specializing in behavioral health and human services. He discovered Johnson County VASIA from reading a newspaper article and has taken four assignments in the past year-and-a-half.

"Having a human service background, that's always been my

soft spot," Heidenreich said. "Even though I wasn't practicing clinically anymore, I still felt the need to try to be of some benefit to somebody else, giving back. I've been very happy with the program ... it's kind of a pure relationship in that you're getting absolutely nothing out of it. There is no money being earned. There is no commission being gained. You're doing it purely for the sake of being of help to someone else. Typically, the response from the person you're doing it for is very positive."

Johnson County VASIA offers training for all interested volunteers, regardless of experience, which covers everything from dementia to how to deal with the nursing homes financially, ethics, procedures and law of guardianship.

Ladd retired from Eli Lilly a year ago and after some thought, went through training to become a volunteer. Having no prior experience, Ladd said she has been learning along the way. She was assigned to a woman in a nursing home in September.

"It's an old cliché but it is a labor of love," Ladd said. "As soon as I saw this person, I bonded with her and have loved the program ever since. I decorated her room for all of the holidays – Thanksgiving, Christmas, Valentine's Day. I treat her like she was my mom. I just spend time with her. Just in the time since September, the nurses say her health is so much better. I'm finding that this is physically, spiritually and emotionally beneficial to her."

Erickson said while volunteers' roles aren't to be a friend or even social worker, they do develop relationships that can make a difference in someone's life. That has been the case for Ladd and many other volunteers.

"This really does not take the work and time I thought it would," Ladd said. "Maybe because I love doing it so much. I have other interests. I love to hike, bike, am an outdoors person, I have a lot of friends. This does not even take away from that, yet it brings so much benefit to another person. That's the wonderful thing about this program. I think I put into it more than they expect of me, but it doesn't take as much time as you think, and it makes a world of difference for that one person."

Volunteer Advocates for Seniors & Incapacitated Adults

All elderly individuals deserve quality care and community support to lead a safe, dignified and independent life. The Volunteer Advocates for Seniors and Incapacitated Adults (VASIA) program is dedicated to serving and safeguarding the needs of incapacitated seniors.

Volunteer Application Process

Prior to beginning training, volunteers in the VASIA Program are required to complete an application process that includes providing 3 written references, authorizations for release of criminal, driving, & social services histories & participating in a personal screening interview with the Program Director.

Upon completion of the application process, volunteers will be required to successfully complete a minimum of 40 hours of initial training and 12 hours of continuing education on an annual basis. (Volunteers may be required training for individual cases involving special needs services.)

Request Guardianship

The following documents and information are required to support guardianship:

- Case Intake Referral Form
- Physician's Report
- Face Sheet
- History and Physical
- Progress Notes/Consult Notes/Nurse Notes
- Medication List