



OCCOA

OTSEGO COUNTY COMMISSION ON AGING



Submitted by
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**RESEARCH &
VOLUNTEER
COORDINATOR**

*We Help.
We Care*

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120 Grandview Blvd., Gaylord, Michigan 49735

New Team Carries on a Legacy of Helping and Caring!

It was with heavy hearts and well wishes that the Otsego County Commission on Aging (OCCOA) staff and clients said "good-bye" this past April to retiring Advocacy Coordinator and MMAP Counselor Loretta Miller. Employed by the agency for over 25 years as the Advocacy Program and Medicare and Medicaid Assistance Program (MMAP) Coordinator, she remains well respected and much loved and appreciated by the agency's staff, as well as by her former work associates and clients.



JOHN PANCI IS THE OCCOA'S NEW ADVOCACY COORDINATOR

After several years of helping clients wade through the murky waters of Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security, in 2005, Miller officially became the OCCOA's Advocacy Program Coordinator with the part-time administrative support of Advocacy Office Assistant Annie Rivers.

OCCOA Executive Director Dona Wishart recalls, "Following an assessment of needs in our community, it became clear that older adults of Otsego County were seeking assistance in accessing information and exploring choices and options related to Medicare, Medicaid, affordable housing, Social Security and long term care. And there were also identified issues related to older adult neglect and self-neglect that needed attention."

Wishart shares, "Loretta Miller became our first official advocacy counselor committed to representing the wishes of her clients without judgment or personal opinion, while living by a 'duty of care' for them. In doing so, she set the pace and standard for the agency and those that followed for allowing people to express their views and concerns, assisting them with access to information and services, defending and promoting their rights, and exploring choices and options for services."

During her years as the Advocacy and MMAP coordinator, Miller built a caring and capable team to help fill the OCCOA's snowballing requests for advocacy and MMAP guidance and counseling from area older adults and caregivers. In 2006, she added MMAP volunteer Sandy Allison to help with the growing requests for Medicare Part D Prescription Drug Plan reviews during the program's first reenrollment period.

John Panci joined the team in September 2009, serving as the Advocacy Program assistant coordinator, as well as a MMAP counselor. In 2011, Cheryl Borowiak transferred to the team from another department to serve as an Advocacy Program assistant. Sarah Skowronski was added in April 2012 as an Advocacy Program and MMAP counselor. Her responsibilities also included supporting the Alpine Alten Zimmer residents as their service coordinator. Danielle Kleinhuizen was the latest addition, joining the OCCOA, part time, in January 2016 and serving as an Advocacy Program and MMAP counselor.

New OCCOA Advocacy Team Announced!

With Miller's retirement, the team has recently been restructured, and Wishart is pleased to announce that Panci is the new Advocacy Coordinator and Skowronski is the Advocacy Assistant Coordinator. In addition to her duties as an advocacy and MMAP counselor, Kleinhuizen will support the Alpine Alten Zimmer residents as their service coordinator. Rivers, Borowiak, and Allison will continue to serve the administrative needs of the program.

In his new role, Panci will be carrying on the legacy left by Miller. He notes, "We have a very dedicated team of employees who have compassion for each client. Our counselors will continue to work diligently with each one to empower them with the education they need to make the best decisions for all of their needs, whether it's Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security issues, rent concerns, utility payments, powers of attorney for health and finances, and much more."

Panci and the other counselors would not be able to accomplish their work without great administrative support. He details, "The Advocacy Administrative Team greets clients, makes appointments and handles the hundreds of phone calls that come in every week, not even counting the walk-in clients, and much more."

Looking ahead, he shares, "We plan to continue to work hard to serve our clients and to offer them positive results." He notes, "In 2014 we saved our clients a combined total of over \$350,000 on the cost of their prescription drug plans, just by helping them explore their options for lower-priced plans. We surpassed that number in 2015 by saving them a combined total of well over \$500,000." He stresses, "Folks who are retired live on fixed incomes and every dollar counts. The OCCOA would like them to keep their money in their pockets instead of needlessly overpaying for their medications and insurance premiums."

When asked what he likes best about his work in the Advocacy Program, Panci shares, "This is the most fulfilling work I have ever done." He explains, "A person turns 65 once in their lifetime, and most folks have no idea how to work their way through the Medicare system. We help people to understand what their options are and allow them to make the best decisions for their future health care, while making the most beneficial financial choices for themselves in the process."

An Advocacy client, Paul Kaczanowski, commented on the counseling he recently received from Panci, "There is no way I could have done my Medicare enrollment on my own. I was so confused with all the mail and ceaseless phone calls that I was receiving that my head was spinning. John's explanation of the Medicare system and the choices I could make for myself were very understandable. I feel confident moving forward, now, in the decision-making process and am thankful for his assistance."

Panci notes that the Advocacy Program is currently gearing up to assist clients with their Medicare Part D reenrollments between October 15 and December 7, 2016. Individual appointments for this assistance are going fast but are still available, as well as for other services offered by the department. He also shares that the program hopes to serve even more people this year by offering group computer Medicare Part D reenrollments in a classroom setting for people experienced and comfortable in using a computer and the Internet.



MEET THE OCCOA'S ADVOCACY TEAM!
FRONT, LEFT TO RIGHT: ADVOCACY AND MMAP COUNSELOR DANIELLE KLEINHUIZEN, ADVOCACY ASSISTANT COORDINATOR AND MMAP COUNSELOR SARAH SKOWRONSKI.
BACK, LEFT TO RIGHT: ADVOCACY OFFICE ASSISTANT ANNIE RIVERS, ADVOCACY COORDINATOR MMAP COUNSELOR JOHN PANCI, ADVOCACY PROGRAM ASSISTANT CHERYL BOROWIAK.



PAUL KACZANOWSKI APPRECIATES THE RECENT ASSISTANCE HE RECEIVED WITH HIS MEDICARE ENROLLMENT THROUGH THE OCCOA ADVOCACY DEPARTMENT

TO SCHEDULE AN INDIVIDUAL APPOINTMENT WITH ONE OF THE COUNSELORS, TO RESERVE A SPOT IN ONE OF THE MEDICARE PART D GROUP COMPUTER REENROLLMENT SESSIONS, OR FOR FURTHER INFORMATION, PLEASE VISIT [WWW.OTSEGOCOUNTYCOA.ORG](http://www.otsegoCountyCOA.org) OR CALL THE OCCOA ADVOCACY DEPARTMENT AT (989) 732-9977.

989.732.1122 • www.OtsegoCountyCOA.org • Advocacy 989.732.9977

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