



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



OCCOA ADVOCACY TEAM LEADERS!
COORDINATOR JOHN PANCI AND ASSISTANT COORDINATOR SARAH SKOWRONSKI

The OCCOA Advocacy Department - Their Teamwork Helps You To "Get it Right"!

When it comes to providing assistance to older adults for Medicare and Medicaid issues and important life questions and decisions, the Otsego County Commission on Aging (OCCOA) Advocacy Department is hard to beat. The secret? Teamwork! The department is led by Coordinator John Panci and Assistant Coordinator Sarah Skowronski. Together, they are responsible for running the department. This includes managing three paid staff and two volunteers, as well as overseeing the agency's highly-acclaimed Medicare/Medicaid Assistance Program (MMAP). Both are experienced, award-winning, certified MMAP counselors with a passion for helping others.

I recently had an opportunity to visit with Panci and Skowronski about their department and its success. They agreed that they both bring various strengths to the department. Skowronski explained, "John is such a strong leader because he is so open-minded and maintains an open-door policy. He always has our backs and is fun to work with." John noted, "Sarah has very good office skills and has taken on the responsibility of training the staff. She and I truly work as a team and collaborate on almost every decision that effects the department."

MEET THE REST OF THEIR TEAM! The rest of their team includes Michelle Miller, Lynn Sweeney, and Theresa Ross, as well as RSVP volunteers Sandy Allison, and Ann Wright. Miller was hired last fall to replace Danielle Kleinhuizen, who left in December to prepare for the birth of her first child. Miller is also a certified MMAP counselor and is the service coordinator for the residents of the Alpine Alten Zimmer. The department's administrative staff consists of Sweeney and Ross. Sweeney is the office administrator and Ross works as support staff. Panci shared, "Lynn and Theresa are professional and courteous and work as a team to complete all of the department's client intakes." He added that completing MMAP training is an important goal for the administrative staff. He noted, "Lynn has completed her training and Theresa will soon be taking hers. This will allow them to support both our clients and MMAP counselors more effectively." Panci shared that Sandy Allison has been a long-time MMAP-trained volunteer for the department and is primarily responsible for database entries. Wright is a certified MMAP counselor who has been very helpful in assisting clients during the last two Medicare Part D Prescription Drug Plan Open Enrollments.

OVER 14,700 HOURS WORKED IN 2017! Throughout the past year, these talented, dedicated individuals combined their skills, training, and passion for helping others by working 14,765 hours to serve county older adults, family caregivers, and person living with disabilities through a wide range of services. Many of these services were provided through the MMAP Program, which addresses Medicare and Medicaid Program issues, including the Medicare Prescription Drug Plans. Panci noted, "Assisting clients during the Fall Open Enrollment with their prescription drug plans is huge for our department." Skowronski shared, "It runs every year, from October 15 through December 7. This year we served 972 clients." Panci noted, "But we also offer counseling for other services that many people aren't aware of." Such services include help with advanced directives, conservatorships, guardianships, and powers of attorney; finding affordable housing, adult foster care, and nursing homes; social security and retirement concerns and questions; insurance billing disputes; and older adult neglect, exploitation, and abuse reports. Both Panci and Skowronski agree that the demand for services is only expected to rise as even more baby boomers enter into retirement.

Despite the large numbers of people that walk through the door, it was easy to see Panci and Skowronski's passion and commitment to helping their clients. Panci noted, "We see each person has having their own unique situation and do our best to address their needs." Skowronski nodded in agreement, and added, "And if we can't help someone, directly, we provide them with a warm handoff by connecting them with someone who can."

A LOCAL RESIDENT SHARED HER EXPERIENCE! The respect and appreciation for the services provided by the Advocacy Department is highly evident in talking to the clients served. Betty Moore, a community leader and owner of Jet's Pizza, recently shared her experience in working with the department. She noted, "I'm experienced in running a business and filling out paperwork. As a retired person, I soon learned that trying to figure out what the government and my health insurers wanted from me and making choices that fit my needs was daunting." She recalled, "I wanted things to be right, but I was always afraid of getting them wrong."

Moore's solution, five years ago, was to turn to the agency's Advocacy Department. She recalled, "I had the privilege of working with Sarah. She has been wonderful! She input everything in the computer and then reviewed my Medicare insurance and prescription plan options with me. Thanks to her, I was able to make choices that best fit my needs." Moore emphasized, "Since then, I've been making an appointment with Sarah every year to review my insurance options. Everything is very organized when I arrive. Sarah's help makes it so much easier than trying to figure out things by myself." She concluded, "I'm in and out in an hour with an appointment scheduled for the next year! Done deal!"



SHARING HER EXPERIENCE!
CLIENT BETTY MOORE AND OCCOA ADVOCACY ASSISTANT COORDINATOR SARAH SKOWRONSKI

DO YOU NEED HELP GETTING IT RIGHT?

TO SCHEDULE AN APPOINTMENT WITH ONE OF THE OCCOA'S ADVOCACY DEPARTMENT COUNSELORS, OR FOR FURTHER INFORMATION, PLEASE CALL (989) 732-9977.

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