



Long-Term Care
**Ombudsman
Program** **FLORIDA**

ANNUAL REPORT

FEDERAL FISCAL YEAR 2025



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PROGRAM MISSION

“The mission of the Florida Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program is to improve the quality of life for all Florida long-term care residents by advocating for and protecting their health, safety, welfare, and rights.”



MESSAGE FROM THE SECRETARY

Dear Florida
Ombudsman
Team,

As we close
another year of
advocating for
Florida's most vul-
nerable residents
in long-term care,

I am once again inspired by the tireless, unwavering dedication of our staff and volunteer ombudsmen. Each of you continues to show what true advocacy looks like, and the impact of your commitment is felt every day by the seniors who rely on this program.

Throughout my tenure as Secretary, the Ombudsman Program has remained close to my heart. I have consistently asked myself what more I could do—as a leader and as a partner—to enhance the quality of life for seniors in long-term care, and how the program could build on its improvements to become an even more impactful, compassionate force for the residents we serve. One of the most meaningful actions I could take was to identify opportunities to strengthen the program's funding. Because LTCOP receives both state and federal dollars, the question became: Are we truly maximizing every available resource? And is there a way to bring even more support to this essential work?

Just as vulnerable seniors can be overlooked, so too can the very program that advocates for them. Through a collaborative, agency-wide effort, we found a pathway to significantly enhance

our federal funding stream—optimizing resources and ensuring the program is positioned to better meet the needs of residents statewide. Being able to expand and stabilize this funding, to the fullest extent possible, stands as one of the legacy decisions I am most proud of as Secretary.

Reflecting on the past several years, I am equally proud of the strategic improvements we have made together—from creating the Transitions Advocate role, to implementing critical IT enhancements, to rolling out more robust and unified training initiatives. The last four years have truly been a period of transformative change and much-needed modernization for the Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program. While our work is far from finished, these advancements have strengthened the foundation of a program that has immense responsibility and even greater potential.

It has been my honor to help elevate a program that means so much to me personally, and I remain committed to being its strongest champion and our seniors' fiercest advocate. Thank you for the compassion, professionalism, and dedication you bring to this vital mission. I am grateful to stand alongside you in service to those who need us most.

In gratitude,

Secretary Michelle Branham
Florida Department of Elder Affairs



MESSAGE FROM THE STATE OMBUDSMAN

Every year, as we look back to complete our annual report, we are reminded of the profound impact the advocacy offered by the Long-Term Care Ombudsman

Program has on the lives of residents in long-term care and their families. As we work to protect health, assure safety, uphold rights, and advocate for those most in need—often with limited resources, LTCOP continues to modernize, innovate, and strengthen its ability to stand up for Florida's seniors.

With more than 200,000 Floridians living in long-term care, it is crucial to recognize that ombudsmen, as a first line of defense, are often the only ones who hear directly from residents themselves. No inspection, rating system, or regulatory review captures the lived experiences residents share with us in their own words. Their voices—honest, vulnerable, and often unheard elsewhere—are the heart of our mission and the clearest measure of what is truly happening inside facilities.

Our staff and volunteers work tirelessly on behalf of these residents. Some days it may feel like our efforts are not enough, but it is essential to remember: Our role is to respond when residents' rights are violated and to ensure their concerns are not dismissed. Poor outcomes in a facility are not the result of a

failure of the ombudsman program. Our responsibility is to listen, to act, and to protect rights—one resident at a time.

Despite ongoing staffing shortages that limit our reach, our staff and volunteers remain deeply committed to our advocacy. If the state wants to meaningfully improve residents' quality of life, ensuring more ombudsmen are available to hear residents' concerns firsthand would be one of the most impactful steps it could take.

As our program stabilizes after years of rapid change, we will continue focusing on efficiency, effectiveness, and expanding our reach. What remains unwavering is our mission: **to ensure the voices of Florida's long-term care residents are heard, respected, and acted upon.**

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Terri Cantrell". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "T" and "C".

Terri Cantrell, State Ombudsman
Florida Department of Elder Affairs

CHAMPIONING DIGNITY, RIGHTS, AND ADVOCACY FOR EVERY RESIDENT

Program Overview

The Florida Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program (LTCOP) advocates for residents of nursing homes, assisted living facilities, and adult family-care homes by investigating and resolving complaints, promoting residents' rights, and improving the overall quality of long-term care.

Ombudsmen are trained volunteers supported by professional ombudsman staff who work statewide to ensure that residents' voices are heard and their rights are protected. Through education, advocacy, and problem resolution, the program strives to ensure that all long-term care residents in Florida live with dignity and respect in a safe and supportive environment.

Program Reach

Florida's Ombudsman Program maintains statewide coverage through 18 district councils, collectively supporting residents in more than 4,000 long-term care facilities. Volunteers are active in urban, suburban, and rural regions, ensuring advocacy presence across all facility types.

This report represents the collective advocacy of **18 district councils, 229 volunteers, and 31 staff members**, working together to protect the rights and dignity of Florida's long-term care residents.

Mission and Authority

Mission

To improve the quality of life for all residents in long-term care by advocating for their health, safety, welfare, and rights.

Authority

The Florida LTCOP operates under the **Older Americans Act §712, Florida Statutes Chapter 400, Part I, and Florida Administrative Code 58L**. These laws provide the program with access to residents, records, and facilities necessary to investigate complaints and advocate for change.

Core Responsibilities

- Investigate and resolve complaints made by or on behalf of residents.
- Ensure residents have regular, unimpeded access to ombudsman services.
- Educate residents, families, and staff about resident rights and facility responsibilities.
- Advocate for systemic changes that improve the quality of care and quality of life.
- Represent resident interests before governmental agencies and legislative bodies.

PROGRAM DATA

Key Performance Metrics

The data below reflects verified state-wide totals for federal fiscal year 2025 (October 2024 through September 2025)

ACTIVITY	2025 TOTAL
VISITS	
Complaint-related	297
Routine	13,156
INFORMATION & ASSISTANCE	
Individuals	21,838
Facility Staff	2,595
EDUCATION	
Technical Assistance to Volunteers & Staff	543
Training for Facility Staff	27
OTHER	
Participation in Facility Surveys	2,979
Legislative or Media Contacts	11
Total Documented Activities	45,840

**Total number reflects activities not included in list above.*

Program Achievements and Outcomes

In 2025, ombudsmen across Florida conducted 13,156 routine visits and participated in 2,979 facility surveys, continuing the program’s emphasis on proactive advocacy and relationship-building with residents and providers.

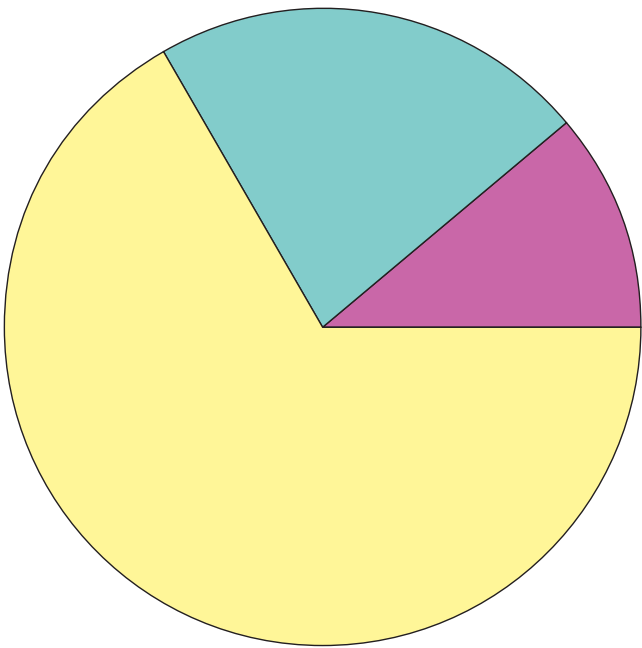
A total of 3,844 complaints were closed, with 2,943 verified to the residents’ concern. Florida’s complaint-resolution work continues to center on collaboration

and empowerment—helping residents achieve satisfactory outcomes while supporting facility improvement.

Complaint Resolution Outcomes

Out of 3,844 complaints closed statewide:

- Resolved/Partially Resolved: 2,552 (66%)
- Withdrawn: 840 (22%)
- Not Resolved: 424 (11.0%)



Florida’s 2025 complaint resolution rate (66%) remains below the most recently reported national average of 71% as reported by the U.S. Administration for Community Living (ACL) through its National Ombudsman Reporting System (NORS).

Source: Administration for Community Living, National Ombudsman Reporting System (NORS), 2023.

Top Complaint Categories

In 2025, ombudsmen documented concerns across a wide range of areas affecting residents' daily lives. The top complaint categories were consistent with national trends and prior years, reflecting the ongoing challenges of staffing shortages, facility resources, and resident autonomy.

1 Care & Staff Responsiveness
Personal hygiene, assistance with meals, medication management, delayed staff response.

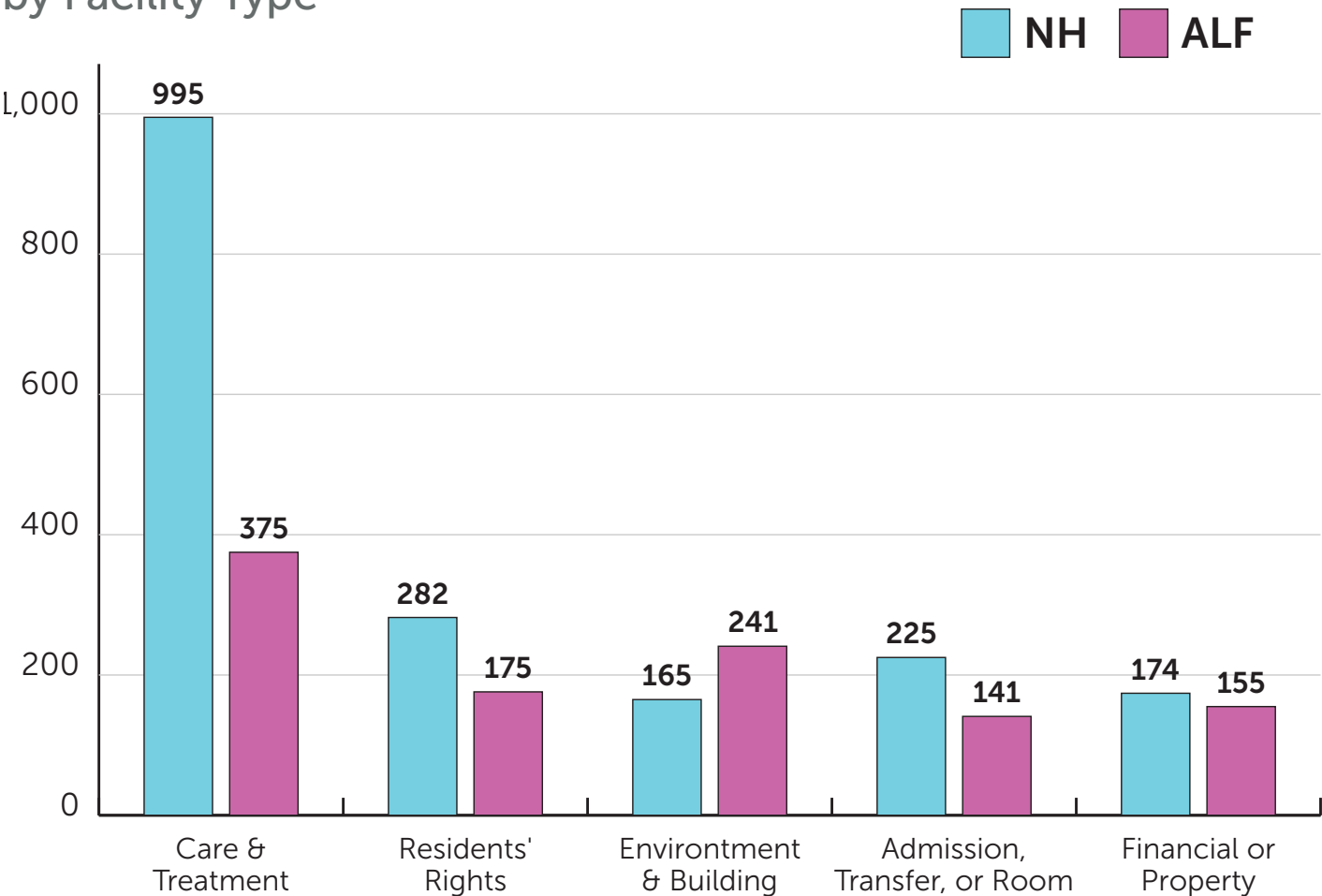
2 Autonomy & Resident Rights
Choice in residency, privacy, visitation, choice of providers, and personal decision-making.

3 Environment & Maintenance
Cleanliness, pest control, building temperature, noise, and maintenance issues.

4 Transfer & Discharge Discharge or eviction, admission, room issues

5 Financial & Property
Billing disputes, missing property, and access to personal funds.

Top Five Complaint Categories by Facility Type



PROGRAM INITIATIVES

Protecting Residents from Improper Discharges & Transfers

Discharge and transfer notices, effectively eviction orders from long-term care facilities, represent one of the most destabilizing threats facing Florida's vulnerable residents. For seniors already managing complex health needs, an unexpected discharge notice can mean abrupt separation from medical providers, loss of community, and in some cases, homelessness. Many residents receive these notices without understanding they have the right to appeal or remain during the process.

This year, the Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program strengthened its response by introducing a Transitions Advocate, a role dedicated to proactively identifying unlawful discharges, educating residents on their rights, and coordinating assistance to help residents remain safe in their homes.

The results have been immediate. In just over one year, the Transitions Advocate has referred 40 cases to AHCA and 25 to Legal Aid compared to only 6 and 2 respectively over the preceding three and a half years. Eighty-five appeals have been filed on behalf of residents facing removal. This dramatic increase reflects stronger intervention, not rising incidents—residents are now receiving the support they were entitled to all along.

Impact at a Glance

Before the advocate role was created (3.5 years):

- 209 Transfer & Discharge cases
- 6 AHCA referrals
- 2 Legal Aid referrals

After the advocate role was created:

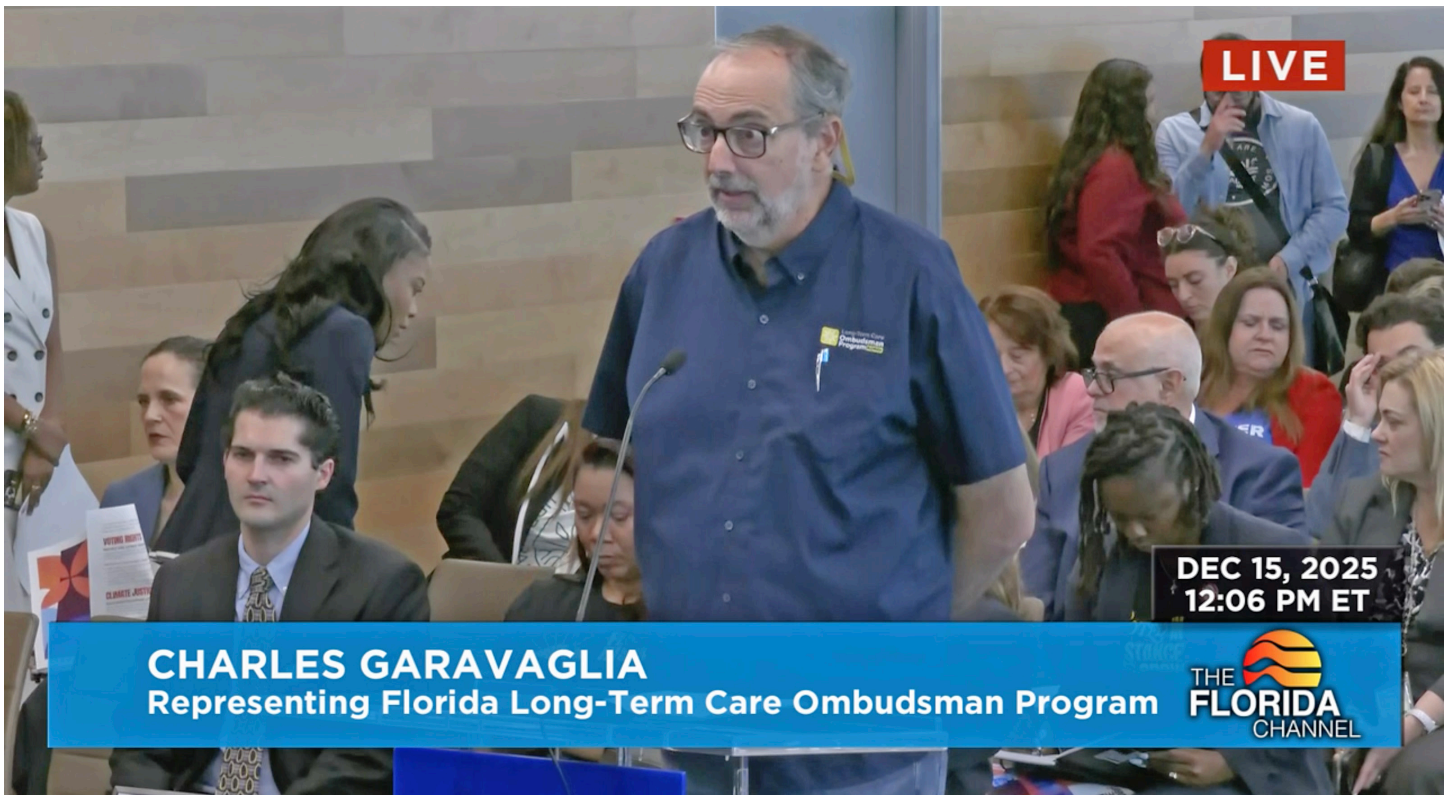
- 230 Transfer & Discharge cases
- 40 AHCA referrals
- 25 Legal Aid referrals
- 85 Appeals filed

A Real Story of Impact

A resident facing discharge over unpaid patient-responsibility fees risks losing both necessary specialized care and proximity to family. The Transitions Advocate helped him understand the billing issue, worked with the facility, and secured his ability to stay. Months later, he shared with another ombudsman how much that support changed his life.

Strengthening Systems & Partnerships

This focused role has expanded our collaboration with AHCA and legal aid programs statewide, helping create a more coordinated, comprehensive response to discharge and transfer issues.



Improvements Are Still Needed

While nursing homes must send all discharge/transfer notices directly to the State Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program, Assisted Living Facilities are not required to do so—nor must they provide a reason for discharge. Strengthening these requirements through legislation would allow us to intervene earlier and better protect ALF residents from inappropriate or unsupported evictions.

Raising Awareness Across Florida

This year, our volunteers took deliberate steps to increase public and legislative awareness of LTCOP. They attended delegation meetings across the state, sharing firsthand stories of how ombudsmen have helped residents maintain their dignity, improve their quality of care, and, in many cases, remain safe in their homes.

Their advocacy brought real experiences to life—illustrating for legislators,

community members, and local leaders how the persistence of an ombudsman can transform a resident's well-being and restore their sense of control and respect.

Continuing the Effort in 2026

This important educational work will continue into the new year. Volunteers and staff will participate in a Day on the Hill at the Florida Capitol in January, meeting directly with lawmakers to share how the program operates and the critical role ombudsmen play in protecting resident rights.

We are honored to have such dedicated volunteers working alongside our staff. Their passion, professionalism, and commitment strengthen our program and ensure that residents across Florida continue to have powerful advocates standing by their side.

SUCCESS STORIES

Training & Volunteer Engagement

Volunteers remain the foundation of the Florida LTCOP. The program's success depends on their commitment and the professional development that supports their advocacy.

This year, we took a comprehensive and intentional approach to strengthening both staff and volunteer capacity statewide. Our goal was simple: ensure every ombudsman—no matter where they serve—has the skills, tools, and knowledge needed to deliver consistent, high-quality advocacy for residents.

Key initiatives included joint training with AHCA to strengthen regulatory partnerships; policy and procedure updates to ensure consistent case handling; manager-focused development in de-escalation and quality assurance; and volunteer training centered on our most common activities, such as access visits and transfer/discharge advocacy. We also created a Transfer & Discharge Handbook, developed a Management Guide, hosted a statewide Educational Conference, delivered local in-person trainings, and implemented technology improvements, including Spanish-language materials to better serve Miami-Dade County.

By strengthening the skillset of our limited workforce and building statewide consistency, we are creating a more unified, confident, and effective program—one better prepared to protect residents' rights and elevate their voices.



Stories from the Field

A resident with a PEG tube contacted the Ombudsman after feeling dismissed by staff when she explained that the unflavored formula caused regurgitation she could taste, leading her to refuse feedings and lose weight. The Ombudsman helped the nursing team understand her perspective and the impact on her dignity and well-being, ultimately working with the dietitian and staff to create a

new plan that allowed continuous feeding at a lower rate and safely included the pleasure liquids she enjoyed. This simple change restored her comfort, honored her choices, and rebuilt trust—showing how Ombudsman advocacy can turn a resident’s distress into a meaningful, resident-centered solution.

Story # 2

An Ombudsman noticed a resident sitting alone near his doorway and stopped to talk. He shared that he wanted to buy his grandson a gift but had no access to his own money. With his permission, the Ombudsman spoke with staff and learned that during a severe illness two years earlier, he had been deemed incapable of making decisions and his daughter-in-law was made his health care proxy—yet she had continued to control many aspects of his life far beyond health care decisions, even after his health improved. Seeing that the resident was clearly capable of expressing his wishes, the Ombudsman worked with the nursing staff to reassess his capacity. When the evaluation confirmed he could make his own decisions, the facility removed the proxy’s authority, notified the family, and helped him regain control over his life and finances. Grateful, the resident told the Ombudsman he finally felt independent again—and that he was going to buy his grandson that gift.

Story #3

A 92-year-old mother in South Carolina feared something had happened to her son after being unable to reach him in a Jacksonville facility. The Ombudsman found the resident bed-bound without phone minutes and unable to call



his mother. After raising the issue with administration and reminding them of residents’ rights to private phone access, the facility immediately purchased minutes for the resident and began ordering cordless phones so all residents—including those who are bed-bound—could make private calls. When the Ombudsman returned the next week, the resident had already spoken with his mother several times, and cordless phones had been placed on every wing—demonstrating how Ombudsman advocacy can restore connection, dignity, and peace of



Why these stories matter:

These experiences illustrate the power of connection, listening, and advocacy. Each conversation, each visit, and each resolution contributes to a better understanding of residents' needs and reinforces the mission of the program: protecting rights through compassionate action.

Looking Ahead to 2026

Florida's long-term care landscape continues to evolve. Increasing resident acuity, staffing shortages, and demographic growth require adaptive advocacy and strategic planning.

Ombudsman Program Is Critical to Lower-Performing Nursing Homes

Florida's Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program plays an especially critical role in the state's lower-performing nursing homes—those rated one or two stars by CMS. These facilities make up 37.5% of all

Florida skilled nursing homes, far higher than the national average of roughly 20%, placing Florida among the states with the most polarized nursing home quality profiles.

Residents in these low-rated facilities face greater risks related to staffing instability, high complaint volume, inconsistent care practices, and leadership turnover. In these settings, the Ombudsman is often the only independent advocate regularly entering the facility solely to protect residents' rights and elevate their concerns without fear of retaliation. The Program's presence is indispensable in identifying systemic issues early, supporting residents through complex cases, and ensuring their voices remain central in environments where their needs are most likely to go unmet.

Florida's unusually large share of both low-performing and high-performing



facilities creates a unique operational landscape. This means Ombudsmen must allocate resources strategically providing intensive, hands-on advocacy in the state's lowest-performing homes while also navigating the more nuanced, rights-focused issues commonly found in higher-performing facilities. Despite this dual challenge, the Program continues to deliver high-impact advocacy that directly improves the daily lives of residents across the state.

Acknowledgments

The Florida Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program thanks its dedicated volunteers, district leaders, residents, families, and partners across the state. Their service, compassion, and commitment ensure that Florida's most vulnerable citizens live with dignity and choice.



CONTACT INFORMATION

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Statewide

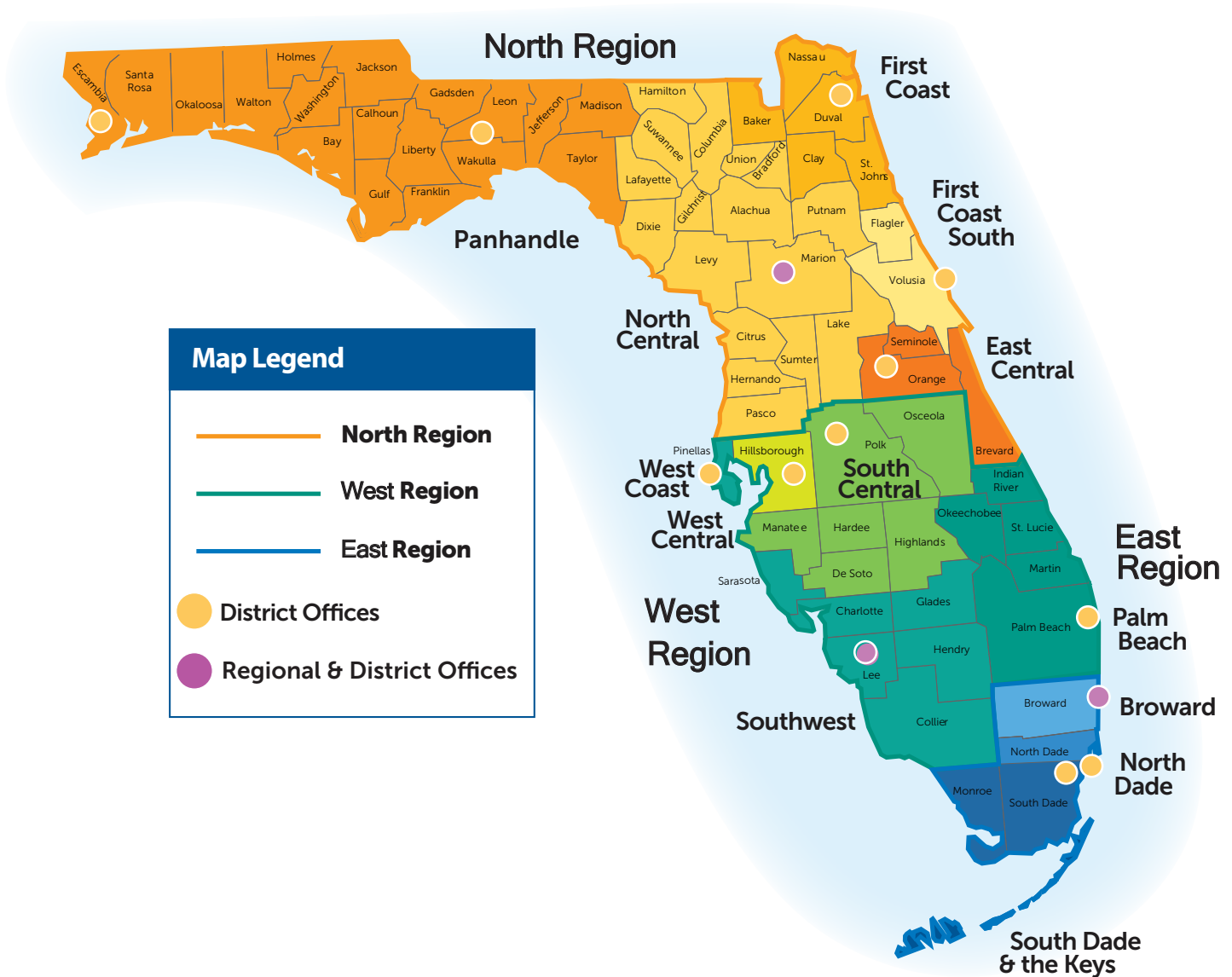
1-888-831-0404
ltcopinformer@elderaffairs.org

Central Office

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OFFICE LOCATIONS

Long-term care ombudsmen are available to serve long-term care residents and their families in all 67 counties. The map below shows the 14 district and regional Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program offices throughout Florida. Some offices are co-located within the same space.





LTCOP

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