

Project volunteers give practical help

John Flintom of Staunton, Virginia, trained to become a volunteer representative payee because he wanted to help.

Flintom works with an elderly family of four—a married couple, their brother and sister—all with severe mental disabilities. As their volunteer representative payee, Flintom deposits their monthly Social Security checks in a special account from which he pays all their bills. But he also does their grocery shopping, takes their dogs to the vet, and has even helped vaccinate goats and install indoor plumbing.

"When I first met the family I realized they required more than money management," Flintom recalls, and it was a responsibility he was happy to take on. But "If you were looking for public praise and recognition, you wouldn't do this," he adds. "It's got to be a labor of love."

Flintom's experience is not unusual. "A lot of representative payees end up going the extra mile for their clients," says Wayne Moore, director of AARP's Legal Counsel for the Elderly (LCE), which sponsors representative payee projects in 27 sites around the country. Al Queen, a volunteer from the District of Columbia, agrees. "Some do just pay out checks and cover the bills, but very few," says Queen, adding, "For most, your work runs the gamut from visiting clients in nursing homes and hospitals to standing between them and their family members, purchasing food for them, and helping them find new living situations."

Developed five years ago by LCE and the Social Security Administration, representative payee projects provide financial supervision for older persons who are unable to manage their own monetary affairs. All clients are low-income, says LCE projects supervisor John Hortum, and are medically certified as incapable of handling their own finances. They are also, often, alone. Explains Hortum, "They have no one else who could do this for them."

Volunteers for the projects (which are located in California, the District of Columbia, Indiana, Maryland, New York, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylva-

nia and Virginia) are solicited through AARP member mailings. So far, more than 300 volunteers have been trained, says Hortum, and some 200 are now serving as representative payees.

LCE requires that a local agency—such as a church, social service group or office on aging—co-sponsor each project that is started. Because so many of the volunteers end up doing more for their clients than simply paying the bills, LCE now requires the local sponsoring agency to provide volunteers with a list of back-up agencies in legal, mental health and social services. Besides helping recruit volunteers, LCE provides technical assistance, training, materials and insurance.

Al Queen and John Hortum confer on volunteer training.



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As a safeguard, all bank statements are mailed to LCE for careful monitoring before being forwarded to the volunteer, says Moore.

Most clients are referred to the project by local social service agencies or Social Security. For some, having a representative payee is the last alternative to a more restrictive court-appointed guardianship.

"As you get involved, you find there is a great need out there for this kind of service," says Queen, who has assisted younger disabled clients as well as older persons. And, for the volunteers, great reward. Says Flintom: "My need to be worthwhile has meshed with their need for help—we're good for each other."

Anyone interested in starting a representative payee project in his or her community can obtain further information from AARP's Legal Counsel for the Elderly at 1909 K St NW, Washington, DC 20049.