

Wexner Medical Center teams up with court to connect patients with guardians

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It doesn't often happen, but sometimes patients stay at Ohio State's Wexner Medical Center for months because they aren't competent to make decisions about where to go next and don't have anyone to be their guardian.

The hospital took a step toward resolving the problem last week by reaching an agreement with the Franklin County Guardianship Service Board, an arm of the probate court.

The hospital has agreed to pay \$65,000 for the board to supply social workers to serve as guardians for up to 15 patients over the next year.

"Finding a guardian for some of these patients can be quite complex," said Dr. Andrew Thomas, the hospital's chief clinical officer.

At any one time, two or three of the hospital's patients — or between 10 and 20 per year — fall into that category, he said.

The problem is significant enough the hospital has a committee of employees from virtually all aspects of its operation that meets weekly to discuss what it calls long-stay patients, he said. Most suffer from dementia or mental illness that prevents them from being able to handle their own affairs and lack family members who can do it for them.

"We all walk out of that meeting each week and want to hug our families," Thomas said. "There are people out there who, for a variety of reasons, are lost to the usual sets of relationships that most of us are blessed to have."

It's a frustrating situation for members of the medical community who feel a calling to serve such patients, he said.

Thomas is optimistic that the agreement with the Guardianship Service Board will allow the hospital to identify patients in need and connect them with guardians in a matter of weeks rather than months.

The guardianship board, the first program of its kind in Ohio, was established in 2015, authorized by a vote of the state legislature. Franklin County Probate Court Judge Robert G. Montgomery developed the idea to fix a glaring problem in the county's guardianship system.

A Dispatch investigation in 2013 revealed a patchwork system of rules for guardians in Ohio that was ripe for abuse by lawyers and family members who robbed wards of dignity, money and freedom.

Montgomery's goal was to move from a lawyer-based to a social-services based system. The county Alcohol, Drug and Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities boards agreed to be partners in the effort and provide funding.

One year ago, the Guardianship Service Board had five social workers and 137 wards, said Jack R. Kullman Jr., executive director. It is getting ready to hire a seventh social worker and now has about 190 wards, he said.

The agreement with the Wexner Medical Center is a significant development and is the board's first public-private partnership, Montgomery said.

"I think it's important because it demonstrates that there really is a need for this service," he said.

Wexner Medical Center might not be the only hospital system to seek the board's services. The community's three other hospital groups — OhioHealth, Mount Carmel and Nationwide Children's — see value in the program, said Jeff Klingler, president of the Central Ohio Hospital Council.

"They are letting Ohio State take the lead and come back to share their experience," Klingler said. OhioHealth and Mount Carmel "may follow their lead."