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## 5 Ways to Be an Effective Advocate for Your Senior Loved One

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Many of us stumble into the role of advocate without any prior knowledge of the senior care landscape. And because we are not professional advocates or caregivers, it can be difficult to make our voices heard in a setting like a hospital, nursing home, or other senior community. So how can we as adult children (and other family members) make sure our loved ones are receiving the proper care?



Patricia Maisano, founder and chief innovation officer of IKOR International, an advocacy and life management organization for seniors and disabled individuals, offers her expert advice.

### 1. Obtain a Power of Attorney (POA).

The first thing an adult child needs to do, says Maisano, is obtain a POA from the parent. In a durable POA, you have the right to access your parents' assets upon signing. It's no wonder, then, that many seniors are reluctant to go that route. That's why Maisano recommends a springing POA, which gives seniors the ability to have some command of their situation. As their loved one, you would only step in when they are no longer able to make their own decisions, as determined by a doctor.

### 2. Create an advance directive.

Maisano recommends talking with your loved ones about their wishes in a medical situation, and then creating a list of those wishes – an advance directive. An advance directive is a legal document that allows seniors to specify their decisions about end-of-life care ahead of time. Some people don't want extreme measures taken to prolong their life, while others want you to do everything possible to keep them alive. Whether or not you agree with their decision, reminds Maisano, is not the issue. "It's that person's right, and you have a duty to them," she says. "They gave you the POA because they trust you."

### 3. Don't rush into any decisions.

Unless there's an urgent, life-or-death situation, Maisano advises you not sign something just because the doctor or nurse tells you to. "If it's something like a slip and fall, you have time, and you need to remind the medical team not to rush you headlong into a decision," she says. Instead, make sure they sit down and talk with you to go over the options. "Medicine is a practice – there are many ways to obtain results," says Maisano. Once you are aware of all the options, you can match them to what your loved one wants, and make sure the advance directive is being followed.

### 4. Be present at the nursing home or assisted living team meetings.

If you show up at the senior living facility one day and ask someone to talk with you about your loved one's care, chances are they will have too many other things on their plate to address your concerns, says Maisano. Most facilities have a team meeting approach, where they meet monthly or quarterly to discuss each patient. As a family member, you have the right to call or sit in on that meeting and get a general overview from the dietitian, physical therapist, and everyone else involved in your loved one's care. "You won't get all the information that a professional would, but you will still have some input," says Maisano. "Get them to engage you."

### 5. Be a squeaky wheel.

If you're seeing something that's upsetting when you visit your loved one, you have to set aside your timidity and be a squeaky wheel. "Squeaky-wheel people have realized that you only get answers when you ask questions," says Maisano, with the caveat that this is a last-ditch effort – not because your grandmother didn't get pudding last night, but because she's hanging out of her wheelchair and needs immediate assistance. "Seniors won't say anything because they're afraid it will be taken out on them," she says. "They don't want the caregivers to be angry with them."

That's where you come in – to be a voice for a senior who may feel voiceless. And you don't have to worry about making the situation worse with your strong advocacy. "In a good facility," says Maisano, "that doesn't have repercussions to your loved one."

*Chime in: How have you been a senior care advocate? In what ways do you feel you need to improve in this area? Discuss...*

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#### About Robyn Tellefsen

Robyn Tellefsen is a New York City-based freelance writer, editor, and blogger whose work has appeared on MSN, AOL Jobs, Chase, Parent Society, The CollegeBound Network, and others. She is also a freelance copy editor and proofreader for textbook publishers, educational technology companies, advertising agencies, and individual authors. Robyn has a bachelor's degree in communications from Wheaton College (IL).