

*Give a "Shout Out!" to Lorelee McDonall-Williams, CPG and Doc Williams, CPG! They are guardians with the Public Guardianship Program who brought this case to the attention of the legislature, which in turn brought about this new bill to help protect individuals with developmental disabilities.*

The abuse case of a 47-year-old Tacoma woman with severe developmental disabilities has sparked new legislation that is headed to the governor's desk for his signature. The bill aims to prevent similar cases by bolstering resources at the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) and for the first time in state history, will create a state ombuds program specifically for people with developmental disabilities.

"The attention that (KING 5) gave the Gholston case brought it to my attention and looking at it further, we found we really did have a systemic problem for those who are most at risk," said Sen. Steve O'Ban (R-University Place), who sponsored the bill.

Five years ago Laura Gholston was rescued from a filthy home in Tacoma. She was found alone in a back bedroom with a lock on the door, only accessible from the outside. Laura was caked in urine and feces and had burns from a meth pipe on her arms and legs.

DSHS investigators determined Laura's nephew had been abusing and neglecting his aunt, even as the state paid him for seven years to be her sole caregiver. Laura's only safeguard - mandatory yearly visits from her DSHS case manager - didn't catch any red flags about Laura's condition.

One way the nephew was able to get away with the mistreatment was by isolating his aunt. Laura had no outside activities such as a day program, therapies, doctor appointments or supported employment. Advocates say isolation is the enemy for people who are unable to advocate for themselves.

"We always feel like you have to have as many eyes on a person who maybe can't speak for themselves as possible," said Sue Elliott, Executive Director of the ARC of Washington state. The ARC is an advocacy group dedicated to protecting the rights of people with developmental disabilities.

The new legislation will fund additional case managers for adults who are deemed the most isolated, such as Laura Gholston was. It requires a case manager to visit the most at-risk adults at least three times a year. Currently only one visit is necessary.

“We are just thrilled. This bill is going to make a major difference in a lot of people’s lives. That’s so concrete. We can see it, we can feel it, and I think DSHS is thrilled too because they’re getting the tools to do what they would like to be doing, which is to have more contact with people,” said Donna Patrick, public policy director for the Washington State Developmental Disabilities Council.

In addition, at least one visit has to be unannounced. In the current system, the yearly visits are scheduled well in advance, giving caregivers a chance to put their best spin on the situation.

“I think it’s really important that for those caregivers who are neglectful or worse, that they know that at any time the state will be knocking on their door. I think that will be a deterrent effect (on neglect and abuse of a vulnerable person),” said O’Ban.

The legislation also creates an ombudsman program specifically for people with developmental disabilities. The new office will consist of five employees and volunteers, who will be trained to visit the most vulnerable for prevention of mistreatment as well as to investigate complaints.

Advocates for the disabled have lobbied the Washington state legislature for 20 years to fund an ombudsman program for this population, with no success, until now.

“(An ombuds) will give us independence (from state agencies). It will give us information that we need about where gaps are, what is needed here or there and will help us to develop policy,” said Patrick.

The additional resources will cost the state approximately \$1.5 million a year.

“We are taking the responsibility to care for these most vulnerable people. This to me is money well spent. We can’t have another Gholston case like the one you exposed,” said O’Ban.

“This is a victory for people with developmental disabilities,” said Elliott.

In 2015 DSHS agreed to pay \$2.5 million to Laura Gholston to settle a lawsuit that alleged the state didn't carry out its duty to protect her.