

A public service

Volunteers can give a voice to those who struggle to speak for themselves. By Rebecca Thistleton

Ruth Baker says she would have paid for the experience of volunteering with the Office of the Public Advocate.

The Heidelberg resident, in her early 70s, wanted to stay active after retiring as headmistress of Methodist Ladies College in 1998. Rather than choosing a calmer, more relaxing hobby, Ms Baker threw her time and energy into visiting mental health patients.

OPA community visitors talk to patients and make sure care is up to scratch. They can visit a facility for people with a disability or mental illness at any time.

"I've always been up for a challenge," she says. It's reassuring for people to have someone they turn to as more of a friend – someone who's not involved and who is there to listen and understand."

On one occasion, Ms Baker acted on behalf of a woman who felt security guards had manhandled her. "She felt she had been shamed and the difference we made was not about laying blame, but making her feel safer, which changed her perspective, knowing I would pass

on what she said and felt to staff," she says.

On another occasion, she was the catalyst for change between a treatment facility and a hospital where bureaucratic tie-ups prevented co-operation and timely help for a patient.

As a community visitor, Ms Baker questions protocol, reassures the patient's family and makes sure the patient is properly treated. The work draws on her patience and ability to communicate. She says while it's not easy, the work is rewarding.

In 2005, she was awarded a Medal of the Order of Australia for her services to education and mental health. "It isn't always easy to go into an acute psychiatric ward. You never know how people will act around you – it's important to keep in mind you're invading their space. Every time you walk in, you're changing the dynamics," she says.

As a young adult, Ms Baker discovered she had an aunt who suffered schizophrenia and was institutionalised. She was shocked to learn of her existence, and was sad that her aunt was never mentioned. "I sort of felt I owed her

something," she says. Over time, volunteering has grown into a convening role and Ms Baker says she has scaled back her advocacy workload.

"I'll always keep a little door open," she says.

Public advocate Colleen Pearce says more community visitor volunteers are needed in Melbourne's northern suburbs, and other areas.

Ms Pearce says people with good communication skills, empathy and compassion are being sought to look out for the human rights of people with a disability or a mental illness. ■

For more information, visit the Office of the Public Advocate at publicadvocate.vic.gov.au or call 9603 8339

