

**Paper Prisons: Missouri woman details struggle to leave public guardianship after husband's death, [Matt Flener](#), (Nov 14<sup>th</sup>, 2025)**

<https://www.kmbc.com/article/missouri-woman-struggle-leave-guardianship-husbands-death/69439446>

**Paper Prisons: Missouri woman details struggle to leave public guardianship after husband's death**



**PULASKI COUNTY, Mo. —**

Barbara Chaffee fought hard for her freedom from public guardianship in Missouri.

But that freedom came with a cost.

Chaffee now lives in public housing with donated appliances. She has lost her money, her home and most everything she owned.

Chaffee says she fought hard to leave a nursing home for three years while the public administrator's office in Pulaski County controlled Chaffee's finances, housing and decisions after her husband's death.

"We had a good life," Chaffee said while remembering her late husband, Dennis.

The public administrator in Pulaski County, Becky Allen, has declined to comment about Chaffee's case. Chaffee is critical of Allen's work on her case, believing she could have done much more to help her leave guardianship.

Chaffee agreed to share her story in a KMBC 9 investigation called "Paper Prisons," documenting the struggles of Missouri's wards of the state along with their families under Missouri's public guardianship system.

It's a complicated network of court orders, medical paperwork and financial filings that wards must navigate under the watch of elected officials, doctors and nursing home administrators. KMBC is also seeking answers, perspective and context from those in charge of keeping wards of the state in their care for their recommendations on how to improve the system.

### **BARBARA CHAFFEE'S LIFE IN GUARDIANSHIP**

Barbara Chaffee mourns not only her husband's death but also what happened after he died.

In 2021, Chaffee became a ward of the state in Pulaski County following her husband's death.

She tried to take her own life.

Court paperwork shows the former public administrator appealed to become her public guardian. The court deemed her incapacitated and disabled. Chaffee cannot remember who asked the public administrator's office to take over her case.

"You know how you get that feeling in your gut? Something's just not right," Chaffee said, reflecting on the judge's decision that gave the Pulaski County Public Administrator's Office control of her money and her home.

Missouri's public administrators are elected or appointed in every county to serve as guardians for people when their families no longer can or want to care for them.

In Chaffee's case, the public administrator said she could not find family to care for Barbara after her husband's death.

Chaffee was kept in nursing homes for more than three years, a period she describes as "horrible."

"Those images in your brain of being in those types of places," she said. "They're burned into your memory. Into your heart."

Chaffee fought hard to leave public guardianship. She eventually worked with an attorney and a doctor to convince a judge to grant her freedom in 2024.

Chaffee believes others in Missouri are also in situations that are difficult to leave when public guardians take control of their lives.

## **PUBLIC ADMINISTRATORS DETAIL CHALLENGES, IMPORTANCE OF THEIR WORK**

Leaders with the Missouri Association of Public Administrators, who were not involved in Chaffee's case, recently spoke to KMBC 9 Investigates to detail their work in challenging situations.

"Public administrators are some of the most caring people that I know," said Cher Caudel, Moniteau County public administrator since 2003 and current MAPA president. "They truly do want to make a difference for the people that they are appointed to, and they do the best that they can with what they have, and a lot of times what we have isn't much."

A 2020 [report](#) commissioned for the Missouri Association of Public Administrators highlighted how public administrators often do not have enough resources, "while navigating complex systems to provide care for their wards – while also facing increased pressure from the state and stakeholders to ensure all wards are placed in their least-restrictive alternatives."

Caudel, along with former MAPA President and Webster County Public Administrator Danielle Boggs, emphasized restoration into the community for wards is a goal, though they acknowledge the challenges if someone does not cooperate with their care or restoration plans.

They also said public administrators do not have a goal to keep people in nursing homes or other residential care facilities long-term.

"There is never a time when I say, 'Okay, we're going to put you there, lock you there, throw away the key,'" Boggs said.

Boggs and Caudel also said restoration is not a problem in their respective counties.

Missouri does not currently track how many wards of the state are restored away from guardianship. MAPA leadership said it could possibly be beneficial to track restorations away from guardianships, but since each county is run differently by appointed or elected officials with different levels of staffing, caseloads and resources, it could be difficult to interpret what restorations mean, especially with different judges' requirements in probate courts across the state.

## **RESPONSE FROM PULASKI COUNTY PUBLIC ADMINISTRATOR**

In a written statement, Allen declined to comment on Chaffee's case.

During a visit to Pulaski County, KMBC 9 Investigates attempted to speak with Allen about her role as a public guardian on another case KMBC 9 has investigated.

She declined to comment about that case, too.

Chaffee eventually left her guardianship with the help of an attorney and doctors who proved she did not need to be in a nursing home.

Still, Chaffee has very little to her name.

"I was stripped bare," Chaffee said.

Chaffee hopes by sharing her story she can help others leave public guardianship if they don't need to be there.

Throughout the next year, KMBC will continue to explore the challenges and opportunities for improvement in Missouri's public guardianship system.

We need your help.

If you know of someone going through struggles with Missouri's public guardianship system, or if you have a case to highlight that exposes solutions for Missouri's public guardianship system that could teach lessons to others, please email [investigates@kmbc.com](mailto:investigates@kmbc.com).