

# CHAPTER 11 TELEPHONE PROTOCOL

## I. Introduction

In order to qualify for federal funding under the Older Americans Act, Long-Term Care Ombudsman Programs must ensure that long-term care (LTC) facility residents have regular and timely access to ombudsman services, and that they receive timely responses to their complaints.

The LTCOP responds to critical, and in some cases, life-threatening situations. While many serious incidents are observed or reported during on-site facility visits, telephone contacts are a key access point to the program. Competent and professional telephone service is mandatory because of the serious nature of the calls received from residents of long-term care (LTC) facilities, their friends, family members, and the public.

## II. Legal Authority

**FEDERAL** Title 42 United States Code section 3058g(a)(3)(D)

**STATE** Welfare and Institutions Code sections 9718 and 9726  
Health and Safety Code section 1422.6

## III. Advertised Telephone Numbers

Local Ombudsman Program Coordinators should list their local LTC Ombudsman Program telephone numbers in all local telephone directories. Uniform listing of telephone numbers will make it easier for the public to access ombudsman services. Listings should be stated as: Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program or Long-Term Care Ombudsman Services. In addition, local program telephone numbers should be given to other service agencies to increase accessibility and promote awareness of the program.

## IV. Main Telephone Number

At least one telephone number should be advertised as accessible during regular business hours Monday through Friday (excluding holidays). Telephones should be answered by a person, rather than by a machine or voice mail, during normal business hours except when staff is answering other telephone lines or, in rare circumstances, when no staff is available to answer telephones. If it is not possible to have someone answer the main phone line all of the time, an answering machine or service may be used if the procedures in Section IX of this chapter are followed.

Local Ombudsman Programs may advertise more than one number (i.e., regional office phone numbers); however, the main phone number should always be

listed. This provides the caller with an alternative if he or she is unable to reach the first number on the list.

## **V. Number of Telephone Lines**

Programs should keep the number of phone lines that must be answered and monitored to a minimum. If more than one telephone number is advertised (as occurs in large rural areas), each phone should be answered on the days and during the hours that are advertised. A system to automatically transfer calls from multiple phones to a central number is recommended.

## **VI. Ombudsman Designated Telephone Lines**

To the extent possible, at least one local phone line (advertised number) specifically designated for Ombudsman Program calls should be available. The phone should be answered, “Ombudsman Program” or a similar descriptive greeting. This greeting lets callers know they have reached the program they are seeking. If there is a designated line for the local Ombudsman Program, it should not be answered using names of any other program or agency.

## **VII. Shared Telephone Lines**

When the local Ombudsman Program is housed within another agency (such as an Area Agency on Aging or an umbrella service agency) and a central number is used, the local Ombudsman Program must be identified in the initial greeting, e.g., “Good morning, Adult and Aging Services Bureau and Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program.” In situations when the Ombudsman Program must share phone lines, all agency staff, especially staff from other programs, should be adequately trained on answering the phone, confidentiality of calls, and responding to ombudsman clients. This will require training on the types of situations covered by ombudsman services. Individuals who are not certified ombudsman representatives and answer phones must understand the confidentiality rules and must sign a Pledge Of Confidentiality for Non-Certified Staff and/or Volunteers (OSLTCO S007 – Exhibit 11-A). The individual must not solicit confidential information about a case other than the caller’s name and phone number, and the basic information needed to determine the immediacy of the caller’s need, unless the person answering the call is certified as an ombudsman. If it is not clear whether a caller is seeking ombudsman services, the call should be referred to an ombudsman staff member who can appropriately screen the call.

Monitoring shared phone lines will take more effort than handling a designated ombudsman line. The receptionist in these cases must be sensitive to callers who may be confused by the advertised program name.

## **VIII. Telephone Techniques**

Telephone training courses that deal with telephone etiquette and the professional handling of calls should be provided on a regular basis for all staff who answer Ombudsman Program telephones. Support staff who back up the regular receptionist should also be trained.

During the intake process, the operator should ask the caller for the following information:

- Type of facility: Skilled Nursing Facility (SNF), Residential Care Facility for the Elderly (RCFE) or other type of facility
- Name and phone number of the caller
- Name and phone number of the resident (if different from the caller)
- Name, address, city and zip code of the facility
- Nature of the problem

Calls requesting services that are not within the jurisdiction of the Ombudsman Program should be referred to the appropriate agency. Callers should be given the numbers to call.

For purposes of confidentiality and security, it is very important that callers not be given personal home or cell phone numbers for staff or volunteers. Callers attempting to reach a specific staff member or volunteer should be told that the message will be forwarded and the individual will return the call.

The following minimum standards must be met:

- Answer phones as quickly as possible, preferably within the first three rings. Phones that "roll over" to other lines may cause the caller to hear four or more rings before the person answering can respond.
- Receive phone calls during the noon hour, in person, by staggering lunch times of those who answer calls.
- Phone calls should be returned as quickly as possible. In most cases, calls should be returned no later than the next business day unless the call is a crisis or emergency in a LTC facility. In those cases, calls should be returned immediately.
- If the caller asks to speak to a particular individual, and that individual will not be available for more than two hours, let the caller know when

a return call can be expected. Failure to respond promptly to a call conveys a lack of interest in the caller's problem, and may increase the caller's anxiety.

Ombudsman Program Coordinators should plan ahead to have trained backup staff available in case of illness, vacations, etc. so that advertised phone numbers will be answered appropriately. See Exhibit 11-B for additional guidance on Telephone Techniques.

## **IX. Answering Machines**

Answering machines or answering services should be used only when staff is answering other telephone lines, during non-business hours, holidays, or, in rare instances, when no one is available to answer the telephones. See Exhibit 11-C for Recorded Telephone Message Examples.

When answering machines/answering services are used, the message should clearly indicate the following:

- The caller has reached the Ombudsman Program.
- There is no one available to answer the phone at the present time.
- Provide an alternate phone number, if one is available.
- If there is a life threatening or emergency situation, the caller should call 911.
- Instructions to call the CRISISline number, 800-231-4024, if the call is about an issue in a LTC facility.
- When the caller can expect a return call.
- A statement that calls are confidential.
- Instructions to leave the caller's name and phone number on the answering machine so the call can be returned.

Generic messages such as "call back later" or "we will return your call" with no mention of when the call will be returned are not acceptable. In addition, recorded messages must be updated so the message and statement about a return call correspond with the date the client called. In other words, recorded messages need to be updated as often as necessary to provide current information. Be sure that telephone answering devices and voice mail systems are working properly and have sufficient capacity to accommodate all anticipated calls.

When local Ombudsman Program phones are not answered immediately, callers frequently request assistance by contacting the Office of the State Long-Term Care Ombudsman (OSLTCO) via the CRISISline. Local Ombudsman Programs must notify the OSLTCO if the local Ombudsman Program must use an answering machine or voice mail for a period of more than four hours during regular business hours. The OSLTCO must be contacted if phones will be unanswered and messages will not be checked during the four hour period. The OSLTCO must be informed of: 1) the length of time phones will be sent to an answering device; and 2) a phone number where OSLTCO staff can reach a staff person who can handle crisis situations in LTC facilities.

## **X. Interruption in Telephone or Fax Service**

The OSLTCO must be notified immediately of any telephone or fax disconnection, disruption in service, or other technical telephone access problems. When equipment or service changes are made, local Ombudsman Programs need to plan ahead to make interim arrangements.

Local Ombudsman Programs need to inform the OSLTCO when telephone service changes are planned so that the Office can respond appropriately to any inquiries resulting from the transition or temporary service interruption.

Telephone service changes created by an office move should be planned to prevent a gap in phone service. Telephone number changes and fax number changes should be avoided if at all possible. If a phone number is being changed, the telephone company must be notified to create a recording that refers callers to the new number.

## **XI. Statewide CRISISline for the Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program**

California law requires the OSLTCO to establish a 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week statewide hotline to handle calls regarding crisis situations in LTC facilities.

Welfare and Institutions Code section 9726 specifies:

*(a) The office shall establish a toll-free telephone hotline, in Sacramento, to receive telephone calls concerning any crises discovered by any person in a long-term care facility, as defined in subdivision (b) of Section 9701. The hotline established under this section shall be operated to include at least all of the following:*

*(1) The telephone hotline shall be available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.*

### **A. Toll-free 24-Hour Telephone CRISISline**

The 24-hour LTC Ombudsman CRISISline is intended to provide immediate assistance for residents and/or persons acting on behalf of residents of LTC facilities.

## **B. CRISISline Coverage**

Full-time employees of the OSLTCO respond to calls received on the CRISISline during regular business hours, Monday through Friday, except on State holidays.

The OSLTCO's standard practice is to refer CRISISline calls received during the work day to the appropriate local Ombudsman Program. It is a rare occasion when complaints received via the CRISISline are handled by the OSLTCO. Please refer to Exhibit 11-C of this section for examples of acceptable recorded telephone answering machine messages that refer callers to the CRISISline.

## **C. CRISISline Coverage - After Regular Business Hours, Weekends, and Holidays**

The OSLTCO contracts with an answering service to answer calls received on the CRISISline after regular business hours, 4:30 p.m. to 7:30 a.m., Monday through Friday, on weekends, and State holidays. The Welfare and Institutions Code requires that CRISISline operators respond to crisis calls by contacting appropriate offices or individuals in the local communities where crises occur. This language means that the answering service operators call local LTC Ombudsman Programs to respond to calls they receive.

Welfare and Institutions Code section 9726(a) specifies the following:

*(2) The operator shall respond to a crisis call by contacting the appropriate office, agency, or individual in the local community in which the crisis occurred.*

### **1. Responsibilities of the local Ombudsman Program Coordinator**

The Ombudsman Program Coordinator and/or designees must be available 24 hours a day, seven days a week to handle crisis-related calls. When the answering service determines that a call needs immediate attention, operators from the answering service will call the Ombudsman Program Coordinator or his/her designee at home or on their cell phones. All individuals who respond to confidential CRISISline calls must be certified ombudsman staff or volunteers. Ombudsman representatives are not first responders in emergency situations that require 911 calls. In emergency situations, the CRISISline operators will advise callers to hang up and call 911.

Calls that an Ombudsman Coordinator or his/her designee receives from the CRISISline answering service after business hours, on weekends and/or holidays should be handled in the following manner:

- The local Ombudsman Program Coordinator or designee must immediately respond to emergency situations. An emergency situation is an occurrence requiring immediate attention that imperils the life, health or safety of a LTC facility resident. The local contact person should call the resident or complainant immediately after the answering service gives information about an emergency situation to the local Ombudsman Program contact.
- The local Ombudsman Program Coordinator, or designee, must immediately respond to urgent situations. Urgent situations are problem situations that have not yet occurred, but are imminent, where a LTC resident may be harmed if the issue is not addressed prior to the next business day. The local contact person should call the resident or complainant immediately after the answering service gives the information about an urgent call to the local Ombudsman Program contact.
- The answering service is not supposed to call a Coordinator or his/her backup contact for a non-emergency situation, an event in which the life, health and/or safety of a LTC resident is not at risk.
- In the event an answering service operator does not assess a situation properly and calls a Coordinator or designee about a call that is a non-emergency, the Coordinator is still expected to return the call to the resident or complainant. The local Ombudsman contact person should never request an answering service operator to return the call of someone who has left a message with the after hours CRISISline. The local Ombudsman Program Coordinator or designee should report errors from after-hours referrals made by the answering service to the OSLTCO. The After Hours CRISISline Error Reporting Form, (OSLTCO S501 – Exhibit 11-D) is used to report a problem in the handling of after-hours calls.

On each business day, the OSLTCO faxes records of calls received during non-business hours by the answering service to the appropriate local Ombudsman Program. Local Ombudsman Program staff or volunteers must review each call record and determine what action is needed. At a minimum, local staff or volunteers must follow up and contact all callers with complaints and those who have requested information related to the LTC Ombudsman Program.

Ombudsman Program Coordinators must provide the OSLTCO with current after-hours telephone numbers of the Coordinator and his or her designated back-up staff members. Certified paid staff should have primary responsibility to handle CRISISline calls after hours, on weekends and on holidays. However,

ombudsman volunteers may also handle after-hours CRISISline calls. The OSLTCO will forward these phone numbers to the answering service so that they may call local ombudsman contacts when necessary. All information handled by the answering service and the OSLTCO is confidential, including home and cell phone numbers of Coordinators and their designees.

Local Coordinators must send changes in telephone numbers via e-mail to the OSLTCO Office Technician with a “courtesy copy” (cc) e-mail to the OSLTCO through the State Ombudsman mailbox: [stateomb@aging.ca.gov](mailto:stateomb@aging.ca.gov) at least one day in advance of telephone changes.

The Local Coordinator, or his/her designee, must also e-mail the OSLTCO Office Technician with a cc e-mail to the State Ombudsman mailbox ([stateomb@aging.ca.gov](mailto:stateomb@aging.ca.gov)) at least a day in advance when any of the people who respond to CRISISline after-hours calls will be on vacation. The e-mail should include:

- The name of the person who will be on vacation
- The date and time the person will leave the office
- The date and time the person will return to the office
- The name with after-hours telephone numbers of the person(s) who will act as back-up contacts when the usual person is on vacation

## **2. Responsibilities of the Office of the State Long-Term Care Ombudsman (OSLTCO)**

The OSLTCO will provide training at the beginning of a new contract, and thereafter as needed, for its contracted answering service staff in order to educate the operators about their responsibilities, and provide guidance on effective methods of handling calls.

The OSLTCO will provide the contracted answering service with telephone referral lists for Adult Protective Services, Area Agencies on Aging, Information and Assistance services, mental health advocates, and other agencies as appropriate.

In the event that the contracted answering service is unable to reach the local Ombudsman Program Coordinator or his/her back-up contact, the OSLTCO will provide after-hours phone coverage and respond to emergency and urgent calls until local Ombudsman Program staff is available.

### **D. Long-Term Care Ombudsman CRISISline Posters**

LTC Ombudsman CRISISline posters must be posted in all SNFs including distinct parts within Acute Care Hospitals, Intermediate Care Facilities (ICFs), and RCFEs. Ombudsman posters are not required to be posted in other types of facilities.

Welfare and Institutions Code section 9718 requires that ombudsman posters be posted and include contact information for the local Ombudsman Program and the CRISISline telephone number

*Every long-term care facility, as defined in subdivision (b) of Section 9701, shall post in a conspicuous location a notice of the name, address, and phone number of the office and the nearest approved organization, and a brief description of the services provided by the office and the approved organization. The form of the notice shall be approved by the office.*

Welfare and Institutions Code section 9726(a)(3) specifies the following requirement regarding posting of the hotline telephone number in LTC facilities, specifically Residential Care Facilities for the Elderly (RCFEs) and Skilled Nursing Facilities (SNFs) including SNFs that are Distinct Parts of Acute Care Hospitals:

*(3) The toll-free hotline telephone number shall be posted conspicuously in the facility foyer, lobby, residents' activity room, or other conspicuous location easily accessible to the residents in each licensed facility by the licensee. The Office [of the State Long-Term Care Ombudsman] shall issue, in conjunction with the State Department of Social Services, and the State Department of Health Services [Department of Public Health], guidelines concerning the posting of the toll-free number. The posting shall, at a minimum, include the purpose of the hotline number.*

Health and Safety Code section 1422.6 names the four SNF and ICF (but not RCFE) locations in which Ombudsman CRISISline posters must be conspicuously posted:

*Each skilled nursing facility and intermediate care facility shall post a copy of the notice required pursuant to Section 9718 of the Welfare and Institutions Code in a conspicuous location in at least four areas of the facility, as follows:*

- (a) One location that is accessible to members of the public.*
- (b) One location that is used for employee breaks.*
- (c) One location that is next to a telephone designated for resident use.*
- (d) One location that is used for communal functions for residents, such as dining or resident council meetings and activities.*

By law, the poster must include the name, address, and telephone number of the local LTC Ombudsman Program, the approved organization to handle complaints

from LTC residents. The mandated poster provides an initial contact point at which residents, and persons acting on behalf of residents, can access ombudsman services.

Local Ombudsman Programs are charged with the responsibility of delivering CRISISline posters to all new LTC facilities and replacing posters when they are removed in existing facilities. Posters are available from the OSLTCO. Posters should be placed in SNFs and RCFEs pursuant to the specifications cited in the law.

## **XII. Evaluation of Telephone Accessibility**

Local Ombudsman Program Coordinators, or their designees, should assess staff and volunteers who handle calls on all local Ombudsman Program telephone lines at least once a year for quality assurance. Staff and ombudsman volunteers should be informed that incoming telephone lines will be monitored periodically without advance notice by the Coordinator. The Coordinator or designee should maintain records of the results of the assessment and review those results with staff responsible for answering calls in order to provide positive feedback and identify areas for improvement. The Telephone Service Checklist (Exhibit 11-E) can be used to document the evaluation of telephone response by local Ombudsman Program staff.