



The National **Long-Term Care**
Ombudsman Resource Center

OFFICE HOUR

LAST WEDNESDAY OF
EVERY MONTH



*Working with Families: Communication skills for
Building Trust*

May 27, 2026

Welcome

- ▶ This call is being **recorded**.
- ▶ Use the **chat feature or raise your hand** for questions for the speakers.
- ▶ **Links** to slides and resources will be provided in the chat.

▶ Agenda

- ▶ Navigating Challenging Situations
 - ▶ Scenarios
 - ▶ Questions and discussions
- ▶ Resources



Navigating Challenging Situations

Scenario 1

A nursing home Administrator, Ms. Jones, calls to report ongoing conflict with a resident's daughter, Ms. Daniels. According to Ms. Jones, Ms. Daniels frequently complains, rejects proposed solutions, and often yells at staff. As a result, staff feel uncomfortable assisting her father.

Ms. Jones adds that the resident himself is satisfied with his care and does not share his daughter's concerns. She asks you to reach out to Ms. Daniels to help address the situation.

- ▶ What are your concerns?
- ▶ Since the Administrator asked you to speak with the family member, what do you say, and do, to avoid being perceived as "on the facility's side" and stay within your role as a representative of the program?

▶ First Impressions Matter

- ▶ Discuss the role of the LTCOP.
- ▶ Determine their motivation by asking them what outcome they are seeking.
- ▶ Be clear about what you can and cannot do.
- ▶ Inform them that your next step will be speaking with the resident.

Scenario 2

A family member says, “My mother has had a lot of issues regarding her meals recently. Her meals are often cold and bland. When she asks about an alternative, they only offer a sandwich. We’ve addressed these concerns, but it only gets better for a week or so.”

Paraphrase, Reflect Feeling, Summarize

- ▶ “It must be frustrating that your mother is not enjoying her dining experience, especially since you have both addressed these concerns, on multiple occasions, with the staff. I would be happy to speak with your mother and see if I can provide assistance and advocacy regarding her dietary concerns.”

Scenario 3

Mr. Smith is still upset about an incident regarding the care of his mother that occurred in the past and was discussed with the staff at the time of the incident. He brings up the past incident every time he speaks with facility staff. It upsets the staff – many of whom were not working at the facility at the time of the prior incident.

He requests your assistance in addressing his current concerns about his mother's care.

- ▶ What are your concerns?
- ▶ What do you say and do?

“I” Statements

- ▶ *Your Response* – convey feelings.
 - ▶ Can use “I feel” or “I feel like...”
- ▶ *Your Preferred Outcome* – define the outcome you want without specifying how it has to be done.
 - ▶ Instead of Saying: “You’re talking about something you interrupt me.”
 - ▶ Say: “When I am not able to finish what I’m saying, I feel frustrated and what I’d like is to be able to communicate my complete thought.”

Keep in Mind...

▶ You often speak with people in their lowest point:

- ▶ New to long-term care
- ▶ Anxious/scared
- ▶ In pain
- ▶ Sick
- ▶ Angry
- ▶ Feel Wronged
- ▶ Feel guilty
- ▶ Frustrated with the system

▶ Remember to:

- ▶ Use reflective listening.
- ▶ Discuss the role of the LTCOP.
- ▶ Determine their motivation by asking them what outcome they are seeking.
- ▶ Be clear about what you can and cannot do.
- ▶ Inform them that your next step will be speaking with the resident.

Strategies

- ▶ Try to understand the reason.
- ▶ Let them know you have other obligations.
- ▶ Try to set a limit.
- ▶ Try to focus the conversation.
- ▶ Steer back to the purpose.



Resources

New Resource!

Working with Families: Tips for Effective Communication and Navigating Challenging Situations

- ▶ [Overview](#)
- ▶ [Key Communication Techniques](#)
- ▶ [Ombudsman Program Communication with Family Members](#)
- ▶ [Navigating Challenging Situations with Family Members](#)

Working with Families

Tips for Effective Communication and Navigating Challenging Situations

OVERVIEW

As a representative of the Long-Term Care Ombudsman program (LTCOP) your role is to be the resident's advocate and follow resident direction. However, there will be times when you work with a resident's representative (a family member and/or legal representative), such as:

- When a **resident cannot communicate consent or express their wishes** and a family member is the legal representative and/or complainant.
- Relatives often have a lifelong **understanding of the resident** (e.g., values, preferences, social history, concerns, significant events in her life, and more). In some cases, such information can shed light on what's causing a problem and assist in crafting a solution, especially **when a resident cannot communicate**.
- The **resident needs or wants family support**. For example, a resident may not feel comfortable taking action without encouragement or support from key family members. Making sure that family is involved may be essential for complaint resolution on behalf of a resident.

These resources are designed to provide tips, examples, and strategies to enhance your skills in working with family members (or resident representatives) of residents in long-term care. The information provided builds upon what you've already learned in your initial certification training. In addition to the advocacy and program management considerations in these resources, consult your supervisor and/or State Ombudsman and follow your state program's policies and procedures, as applicable. The following three briefs are part of this technical assistance series:

1. Key Communication Techniques
2. Ombudsman Program Communication with Family Members
3. Navigating Challenging Situations with Family Members

Key Communication Techniques

Working with Families:
Technical Assistance Brief 1

Strong communication skills are the foundation of Ombudsman program work and are vital to advocacy success. Your communication – both how you speak and how you listen – builds trust and meaningful connection, which is critical throughout complaint intake, investigation, and resolution.

Basic communication skills are addressed during [initial certification training](#). Information provided in the Initial Certification Training for Long-Term Care Ombudsman Programs focuses on communication with residents, but many of the communication techniques apply or may be adapted to apply when communicating with family members. The following key communication techniques are provided as reminders as they are particularly useful in problem solving and conflict resolution.

“I” STATEMENTS¹

These are statements in which a person “owns” what she says and does not claim to be speaking for others. They are also a way for a person to express what she wants and needs without blaming another person or making her defensive.

The composition of “I” statements can vary. One approach is to use “I” statements that have the following components:

The Action

In this part of the I-statement, you describe what is happening in an objective way because the other person may not interpret actions in the same way as you.

- The word “when” can be very helpful (e.g., “when ____, I ____”).
- Avoid the use of “you” because it makes people feel they are being accused. For example, avoid saying “you never respond to resident complaints.”
- Avoid emotive words that are tied to a person’s perception. For instance, when you say that someone “barged” into the room, the word “barged” carries a negative overtone, and the other person may not perceive her entry into the room in that way. You could express this more neutrally by saying that the other person came into the room suddenly.

¹ Conflict Resolution Network. Conflict Resolution (CR) Trainers’ Manual: 12 Skills. 2008. <https://www.crnho.org/cc-trainer-manual/>

Ombudsman Program Communication with Family Members

Working with Families:
Technical Assistance Brief 2

SPEAKING WITH FAMILY MEMBERS FOR THE FIRST TIME

By the time a family member contacts you, it is likely that they have been dealing with concerns related to their loved one for some time and may be frustrated. Before you begin processing a complaint, **give the family member time to tell their story and express their feelings.** Ombudsman program representatives are often the first to really listen to what a family member is saying.

Below are some approaches to ensure you acknowledge a family member’s feelings before seeking the information necessary to handle a complaint. In addition to demonstrating that you heard the family member’s concerns and feelings, these approaches may help defuse an emotionally charged situation to enable everyone to focus on the issues.

“It sounds like you care a lot about your aunt. It must be very upsetting to find her with food all over her face and clothes when you come in to visit.”

“So, what I’m hearing is that you are frustrated that the nursing home administrator has not addressed the problems that you have taken to him on several occasions. Is that right?”

“It sounds like you have tried everything you can think of and done the best you can, but your mother is still not getting the help she needs at meals. That must be so frustrating for you. Let’s see what we can do to try to make things better.”

IMPORTANT POINTS TO ADDRESS DURING THE FIRST CONVERSATION WITH FAMILIES

- Discuss the **role of the Ombudsman program** (see next section), including that you will ultimately take direction from the resident whenever possible.
- **Ask family members what they want for an outcome.** This can provide you with important information about the motivation of the person. For instance, if a son’s goal is to get the administrator fired, the case is not about the resident.

Navigating Challenging Situations with Family Members

Working with Families:
Technical Assistance Brief 3

This resource includes communication strategies for Ombudsman representatives and program management approaches for supervisors and/or State Ombudsmen.

STRESSORS EXPERIENCED BY FAMILIES

As noted earlier, by the time many families connect with an Ombudsman representative, they may be extremely frustrated.

They may have experienced something like the following before contacting you:

- They have taken the same problem to staff repeatedly and were told it would be fixed, but it hasn’t been; when asking about the status, staff say they have an “attitude.”
- They feel every time they walk into the facility, there will be some problem they will have to address instead of simply visiting with their loved one.
- They have found their loved one wet with urine, soiled with feces, unkempt, drooling and slumped over in a wheelchair, in pain, or all the above, on multiple occasions.
- They have determined that they must visit the nursing home all the time or else their loved one won’t get even the most basic care and attention she needs.
- They feel their complaints have been discounted, ignored, and minimized so often by the staff that they must get evidence, like hanging onto and showing staff soiled clothing; to prove there’s a problem.

Keep in mind that family members you work with may be experiencing considerable stress.

When the safety and well-being of a loved one are in question, intense emotions often arise, and those emotions can occasionally lead to difficult situations.

TIPS FOR ADDRESSING CHALLENGING SITUATIONS

Families may need you to provide information, guidance and support, or to intervene once or occasionally to help resolve concerns. However, there may be times when you encounter some unique situations. Each situation, family, and resident are different, so there is not one singular answer or approach. The following are tips from experienced Ombudsmen and Ombudsman program representatives that may be helpful in certain situations.

NOTE: We understand program structure and management varies. Make sure to consult your supervisor and/or State Ombudsman and follow your state Ombudsman program policies and procedures, as applicable.

Navigating Challenging Situations

- ▶ A family member is unhappy with your advocacy and insists that a different Ombudsman program representative be assigned to work with her.
- ▶ A representative insists she can't work with a family or individual family member.
- ▶ A family member has a concern about care, but the resident either does not share the concern or does not want anything done about it.
- ▶ Occasionally, family members may disagree among themselves. They may not agree about what should be done for their loved one or may even take action against each other. One of the most common scenarios you may encounter is when one family member bans another family member from visiting the resident.
- ▶ A family member who is the resident's agent per a health care power of attorney document contacts the Ombudsman program with concerns about care. The Ombudsman program representative starts by speaking with the resident to see if she shares this concern and if she would like assistance from the program. However, after this conversation with the resident, the representative is uncertain about the resident's decision-making capacity and her wishes. The representative is unclear about following the wishes of the resident or the agent.

Family Councils!

Ombudsman Resource Center

- ▶ Resources for LTCOP
- ▶ TA Talks/PPTs/Guides

Consumer Voice: Family Council Center

- ▶ Fact Sheets and brochures

Continuity and Communication in Family Councils

Two challenges frequently faced by family councils can be lack of continuity and difficulty with communication. Below are some tips for fostering continuity and improving communication.

Continuity

- Plan for the long-term stability of the group by putting structure in place, such as simple bylaws.
- Work to involve multiple leaders so that if key members of the council stop participating in the council or leave the facility, the group will continue.
- Invite family members of residents who die to continue to participate in the council.
- Frame each family council meeting (as an introduction for people attending for the first time, and as a reminder for those who attend regularly) with a brief introductory statement about "ground rules" for the meeting and the mission of the group.

Communication

- Communicate continually with facility staff and management to advise of any common concerns and suggestions, follow up on action to be taken, discuss family council activities, etc.
- To the extent possible, be part of the solution to problems or improvements to be made at the facility. When raising concerns, brainstorm for ideas about how the concern can be addressed.
- Ask the facility if you can put up a family council bulletin board in the main lobby of the facility to post notices about meetings and other information of interest to family members.
- Establish contact with the long-term care ombudsman. The ombudsman can act as a valuable resource.
- Facilitate communication within the council by following procedures for conducting effective meetings, such as: using agendas, starting and ending meetings on time, sticking to the topic scheduled for discussion, and "assigning" tasks for future activities to be accomplished before the next meeting.
- Make sure that all activities and communications have a purpose and will further progress the family council towards its goals.
- Focus on *common* goals.

Register Now!

Wednesday, June 24th, 2 – 3 ET

A blue rectangular banner with white text and a green icon. The text reads "OFFICE HOUR" in large letters, followed by "LAST WEDNESDAY OF EVERY MONTH" in smaller letters. To the right is a green icon of a person inside a computer monitor frame.

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▶ [Register!](#)



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