



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

WORKING WITH FAMILIES: COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR BUILDING TRUST

May 14, 2026

Welcome

- ▶ This webinar is being **recorded**.
- ▶ Use the **Q&A feature for questions** for the speakers.
- ▶ Use the **chat feature to submit comments** or respond to questions from speakers or other attendees.
- ▶ Please complete the **evaluation questionnaire** when the webinar is over.
- ▶ Links to **resources** will be posted in the chat box and will be posted to the NORC website ltcombudsman.org.

Speakers



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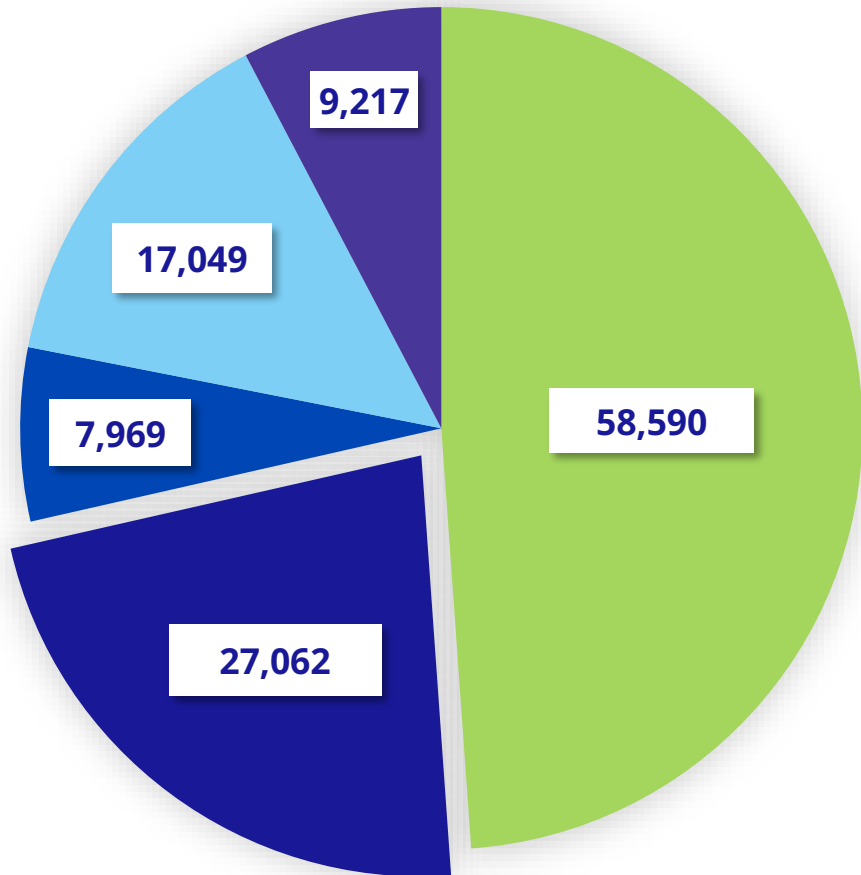
National Consumer Voice for Quality
Long-Term Care, Leadership Council
Member

Agenda

- ▶ Communication with Families
 - ▶ Key Communication Techniques
 - ▶ Establishing Credibility
- ▶ A Family Member's Perspective
- ▶ Navigating Challenging Situations
 - ▶ Scenarios
- ▶ Questions
- ▶ Preview New Resource!

National Complainant Data

Selected Complainants



- Resident
- Resident representative, friend, family
- Ombudsman program
- Facility staff
- Representative of other agency or program or organization

Other Activities

▶ FFY2025 NORS Data

- ▶ Number of instances of Information and Assistance to individuals (includes family members): **611,290**
- ▶ Number of Family Council Meetings Attended: **1,198**
- ▶ Number of Community Education Sessions (could include current and future family members): **9,125**

Importance of Working with Families

- ▶ Family member may be the legal representative and/or complainant and the resident cannot communicate consent.
- ▶ Gain information about the resident when the resident can't communicate (e.g., preferences, history, routines, values).
- ▶ Learn about family dynamics.
- ▶ Resident may need family support.
- ▶ Empower family members (e.g., Family Councils).
- ▶ Family members share their positive experience with the LTCOP with others (and are even more likely to share a negative experience).

Effective Communication

- ▶ Strong communication skills are the foundation of your work and are vital to advocacy success.
- ▶ How you speak, and listen, builds trust and meaningful connection.
- ▶ Basic communication skills provided in the [*Initial Certification Training Curriculum for Long-Term Care Ombudsman Programs*](#).

“I” Statements

- ▶ “Own” your statements and views and do not claim to speak for others.
- ▶ Express what you want without blaming another person or making them defensive.
- ▶ *The Action* – describe what is happening in an objective way:
 - ▶ Avoid “you” as it can feel accusatory. For example, don’t say, “*you* never respond to resident complaints.”
 - ▶ Avoid emotive words that are tied to a person’s perception.
 - ▶ Don’t say: “She *barged* into the room.”
 - ▶ Instead use a neutral, factual statement: “She came into the room suddenly.”

“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 making me so frustrated when 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.”

Open-Ended Questions

- ▶ Helps you build understanding and show empathy
- ▶ You may gain more information
- ▶ Avoid using “why” because using “why” can appear confrontational and make people feel defensive
- ▶ Use “how,” “tell me,” and “what”
- ▶ **For example:**
 - ▶ Instead of Saying: “Why wasn’t your work completed today?”
 - ▶ Say: “Help me understand the reasons your work did not get completed today.”

▶ Reflective Listening

- ▶ Way to validate and affirm the speaker by giving them the experience of being heard and acknowledged.
- ▶ Restate (in your own words) the content and/or feeling of what someone tells you.
- ▶ Types:
 - ▶ **Paraphrasing** – a concise statement of the content of the speaker’s message.
 - ▶ **Reflecting feeling** – identifying the feeling under the speaker’s words and reflecting them back to convey understanding.
 - ▶ **Summarizing** – combining paraphrasing and reflecting feeling.

Reflective Listening

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:

- ▶ “You and your mother have addressed concerns about the food temperature, taste, and lack of variety, but it is an on-going issue.”

▶ Reflect feeling:

- ▶ “It must be frustrating that your mother’s concerns have not been resolved, and she is not enjoying her dining experience.”

▶ 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.”

▶ Power of “We”

- ▶ Instead of Saying: “What are you doing to address this issue?”
- ▶ Say: “Can we talk about what we can do to address this issue?”

▶ First Impressions

- ▶ 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.

Level-Set Expectations

- ▶ **Establish a clear understanding of the role of the LTCOP during the first conversation.**
 - ▶ “I am a resident advocate. I am here for your mother and what she needs, and hopefully we can all work together on this.”
- ▶ **If the family member says her loved one has dementia and can’t communicate...**
 - ▶ “I understand what you are saying, but my obligation is to go and speak with her first. It’s important that I see for myself.”

What if the resident does not give consent...



Points to address...

- ▶ Potential fear of retaliation.
- ▶ When residents make choices, they regain some control.
- ▶ Resident's priorities may differ from their family member.
- ▶ Regardless of physical or cognitive limitations, residents are still adults with the right to direct their own lives.

Emphasize what you CAN do...

- ▶ Check in with the resident during future visits.
- ▶ Encourage the family member to share her concerns with the resident.
- ▶ Share your observations of the resident with the family member (e.g., she looked good and appeared content).
- ▶ See if other residents have a similar complaint.
- ▶ Inform the family member of steps they can take (e.g., join or start Family Council, file complaint with state survey agency).

Establish Credibility

- ▶ Be clear and direct about the LTCOP role.
- ▶ Meet with family members and residents before meetings scheduled with the facility and walk in together.
- ▶ Sit next to the resident, if possible, or the family member during meetings with facility staff.
- ▶ When you interact with facility staff (in the facility or community) be professional and courteous, but not overly friendly (e.g., offer handshakes, not hugs).
- ▶ If you know a staff member (e.g., former colleague, friend from school) disclose that information.

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



A Family Member's Perspective



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?

Scenario 2

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?



Questions?

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.

Register Now!

Wednesday, May 27, 2 – 3 ET

- ▶ Continue our discussion about working with families
- ▶ Opportunity for peer-to-peer learning
- ▶ Bring your questions and deidentified experiences!
- ▶ [Register!](#)



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