

# CHAPTER 11 TELEPHONE PROTOCOL

## I. Introduction

In order to qualify for federal funding under the Older Americans Act, Long-Term Care Ombudsman Programs (LTCOP) 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 or through other means, telephone contacts are a key access point to the program. Because of the serious and confidential nature of calls, local LTCOPs must provide competent and professional telephone service.

## II. Legal Authority

<b>FEDERAL</b>	Title 42 United States Code section 3058g(a)(3)(D)  Title 45 Code of Federal Regulations parts 1324.13(a)(4), 1324.19(a)(3)
<b>STATE</b>	Welfare and Institutions Code sections 9712.5(d)(1), 9718, and 9726  Health and Safety Code section 1422.6

## III. Forms Referenced

(All forms are posted on the Coordinator Resources Webpage at <http://www.aging.ca.gov/>)

- Pledge of Confidentiality for Non-Certified Staff and/or Volunteers (OSLTCO S007)
- After-Hours CRISISline Error Reporting Form (OSLTCO S501)
- Long-Term Care Ombudsman Telephone Service Evaluation (OSLTCO S901)

## IV. Listed Telephone Numbers

Local Ombudsman program coordinators shall list their local LTCOP telephone numbers in all local public telephone directories within their Planning and Service Area (PSA). Uniform listing of telephone numbers will make it easier for the public to access Ombudsman services. Listings should be titled: Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program or Long-Term Care Ombudsman Services if a more general directory category is needed. In addition, the local LTCOP shall provide

telephone numbers to other local community and social service agencies to increase accessibility and promote awareness of the program.

## **V. Main Telephone Number**

The local LTCOP must have at least one telephone number, specific to the program, which is accessible during regular business hours Monday through Friday (excluding holidays). The expectation is that callers will reach a live person, rather than a recorded message during normal business hours except when staff is answering other telephone lines or, in rare circumstances, when no staff is available to answer telephones. Local LTCOPs may advertise more than one number (i.e., regional office phone numbers); however, the main phone number must always be listed. This provides the caller with an alternative if he or she is unable to reach the first number on the list.

## **VI. Number of Telephone Lines**

Local LTCOPs should keep the number of telephone 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 telephone should be answered on the days and during the hours that are advertised by the local LTCOP. When there are multiple lines, OSLTCO recommends having a system to automatically transfer calls from multiple phones to a central number.

## **VII. Ombudsman Designated Telephone Lines**

To the extent possible, each local LTCOP should have at least one local program telephone line (listed number) specifically designated for Ombudsman program calls. Program staff should answer the telephone with the full program title “Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program” or a similar descriptive greeting so that callers know they have reached the local LTCOP. The designated line for the local LTCOP may not be answered using names of any other program or agency.

## **VIII. Shared Telephone Lines**

When the local LTCOP 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 LTCOP 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 local LTCOP must share phone lines, all agency staff, especially staff from other programs, must be trained on phone greetings, confidentiality of Ombudsman calls, information that may be collected from the caller, and appropriate responses to questions related to Ombudsman services. The local LTCOP must train its telephone operators not to solicit confidential

information from callers other than the caller's name and telephone number, and the information necessary to determine the urgency of calls.

Individuals who answer LTCOP calls and are not certified Ombudsman representatives must understand the confidentiality rules and must sign a Pledge of Confidentiality for Non-Certified Staff and/or Volunteers (OSLTCO S007). If it is not clear whether a caller is seeking Ombudsman services, the call should be referred to an Ombudsman program staff member who can appropriately screen the call.

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

## **IX. Telephone Standards and Best Practice**

Any operator or Ombudsman representative answering local LTCOP telephones should ask the caller for the following information:

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

Callers requesting services that are outside the jurisdiction of the Ombudsman program should be referred to the appropriate agency. Operators should give callers the name of the agency and telephone numbers to call.

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

Local LTCOPs must meet the following minimum standards for telephone response:

- 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.
- Return phone calls as quickly as possible. Calls should be returned within two business days at the latest unless the call is a crisis or emergency in a long-term care 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, tell the caller when to expect a return call. 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 listed telephone numbers will be answered appropriately.

#### **X. Alternative Call Intake Options**

Answering machines or voice mail 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.

When an answering machine or voice mail is used, the message should clearly indicate the following:

- The caller has reached the Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program.
- There is no one available to answer the phone at the present time.
- Instructions that if there is a life threatening or emergency situation, the caller should call 9-1-1.
- Instructions to call the CRISISline number, 800-231-4024, if the call is about a crisis in a long-term care facility.
- When the caller can expect a return call.
- A statement that all calls are confidential.
- Instructions to leave the caller's name and phone number on the answering machine or voice mail so the call can be returned.

It is not acceptable for the local LTCOP to use generic messages such as “call back later” or “we will return your call” with no mention of when the call will be returned. 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 must 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 LTCOPs must notify 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. OSLTCO must be informed of: 1) the length of time phones will be sent to an answering device; 2) whether the local LTCOP will be returning calls during that time; and 3) a phone number where OSLTCO staff can reach a staff person who can handle crisis situations in LTC facilities.

## **XI. Examples of Recorded Messages**

### **A. During regular business day when all phone lines are in use:**

*“Thank you for calling the Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program. We are unable to take your call at this time. After the tone, please leave a message and include your name, phone number, facility name, and your concern. We will return your call as soon as possible. If you are in immediate danger, please hang up and call 9-1-1. If you are calling about a crisis in a long-term care facility that requires immediate assistance, call the State CRISISline at 1-800-231-4024. All calls are confidential.”*

### **B. During regular business day when program staff are unavailable because of a staff meeting or staffing emergencies:**

*“Thank you for calling the Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program. We will be unavailable to answer the telephone \_\_\_\_\_ (day) until \_\_\_\_\_ (time). After the tone, please leave your name, telephone number, facility name, and your concern. We will return your call when we return to the office. If you feel you are in immediate danger, please hang up and call 9-1-1. If you are calling about a crisis in a long-term care facility that requires immediate assistance, call the State CRISISline at 1-800-231-4024. All calls are confidential.”*

### **C. After business hours, weekends:**

*“Thank you for calling the Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program. Our business hours are Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. After the tone, please leave your name, telephone number, facility name, and*

*your concern. We will return your call within two business days. If you feel you are in immediate danger, please hang up and call 9-1-1. If you are calling about a crisis in a long-term care facility that requires immediate assistance, please call the State CRISISline at 1-800-231-4024. All calls are confidential.”*

**D. Holidays:**

*“Thank you for calling the Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program. Our office is closed in observance of \_\_\_\_\_ (name of holiday). We will return to the office on \_\_\_\_\_ (day and date), and will return your call at that time. After the tone, please leave your name, telephone number, facility name, and your concern. If you feel you are in immediate danger, please hang up and call 9-1-1. If you are calling about a crisis in a long-term care facility and you need immediate assistance, please call the State CRISISline at 1-800-231-4024. All calls are confidential.”*

**XII. Interruption in Telephone or Fax Service**

The local LTCOP must immediately notify OSLTCO of any telephone or fax disconnection, disruption in service, or other technical telephone access problems. When equipment or service changes are made, local LTCOPs shall plan ahead to make interim arrangements.

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

Local LTCOPs should plan telephone service changes created by an office move to prevent a gap in telephone service. If at all possible, local LTCOPs should retain the same telephone and fax numbers. If a telephone number is being changed, the local LTCOP must notify the telephone company to create a recording that refers callers to the new number.

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

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

Full-time OSLTCO staff respond to calls received on the CRISISline during regular business hours, Monday through Friday, except on State holidays. OSLTCO's standard practice is to refer CRISISline calls received during the work day to the appropriate local LTCOP.

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. State law requires that CRISISline

operators respond to crisis calls by contacting appropriate offices or individuals in the local communities where crises occur. Answering service operators are trained to call “after-hours” designated staff of local programs so that an Ombudsman responds to local callers with emergency or urgent issues. These calls are described in the following section.

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

Each local LTC Ombudsman program coordinator and/or designee(s) must be available 24 hours a day, seven days a week to handle crisis-related calls. All local program representatives who respond to confidential CRISISline calls must be certified Ombudsman paid staff or volunteers. The Ombudsman program coordinator or his/her designee shall handle after-hours calls from CRISISline operators in the following manner:

- An emergency situation is an occurrence requiring immediate attention that imperils the life, health or safety of a LTC facility resident. In emergency situations, CRISISline operators will advise callers to hang up and call 9-1-1. If the call is related to a LTC facility or resident and the caller has provided sufficient information, CRISISline operators will call the after-hours contact in the local LTCOP to advise him or her of the emergency. The local Ombudsman Program Coordinator or designee shall immediately respond to emergency situations by contacting the resident or complainant.
- Urgent situations involve current or imminent problems where a LTC resident may be harmed if the issue is not addressed prior to the next business day. When the answering service determines that a call is urgent and needs attention before the next business day, operators from the answering service will call the Ombudsman program coordinator or his/her designee at the after-hours contact numbers provided by the local LTCOP. The local Ombudsman program coordinator, or designee, shall immediately respond to urgent situations by contacting the resident or complainant.
- The answering service is not supposed to call a program coordinator or his/her designee for a non-emergency situation, an event in which the life, health and/or safety of a LTC resident is not at risk and response can wait until the next business day.
- 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 or designee is still expected to return the call to the resident or complainant as appropriate. The local Ombudsman program contact person shall never request an answering service operator to return the call of someone who has left a message with the CRISISline.

The local Ombudsman program coordinator or designee may report errors from after-hours referrals made by the answering service to OSLTCO using the After Hours CRISISline Error Reporting Form, (OSLTCO S501) or by email to [stateomb@aging.ca.gov](mailto:stateomb@aging.ca.gov).

On the morning of each business day, the CRISISline answering service sends OSLTCO records of all calls they have received during non-business hours. OSLTCO staff sort the call records by PSA, and fax them to the local LTCOP as appropriate. Local LTCOP staff or volunteers review each call record, determine what action is needed, and respond to callers as appropriate.

OSLTCO does not forward call records for calls outside of Ombudsman jurisdiction, calls with insufficient information to allow for a response, or multiple calls by the same caller with no additional information.

Certified paid staff should have primary responsibility for handling CRISISline calls after hours. However, Ombudsman volunteers may also handle after-hours CRISISline calls. Ombudsman program coordinators must provide OSLTCO with current after-hours telephone numbers of the Coordinator and/or his or her designated after-hours contacts. OSLTCO staff forwards an After Hours Contact List (AHCL) containing these telephone numbers to the CRISISline answering service so that the contractor is able to contact local program staff when necessary. All information handled by the answering service and OSLTCO is confidential, including personal telephone numbers of Coordinators and their designees.

Local Ombudsman program coordinators must inform OSLTCO of the following changes at least one day in advance of the change:

- Changes in telephone or fax numbers
- Changes in after-hours contacts for use by the CRISISline answering service – whether permanent or temporary

The local program coordinator, or his/her designee, must e-mail changes to the OSLTCO Office Technician with a cc e-mail to the State Ombudsman mailbox ([stateomb@aging.ca.gov](mailto:stateomb@aging.ca.gov)). The e-mail must include:

- The name of the person who will be taken off the AHCL
- The date and time the person will be removed from the AHCL
- The date and time the person will return to the AHCL (if applicable)
- The name(s) and telephone number(s) of designated person(s) who are approved to provide after-hours coverage.

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

OSLTCO will provide CRISISline training at the beginning of a new answering service contract, and thereafter as needed, in order to educate the operators

about their responsibilities and provide guidance on effective methods of handling calls.

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, OSLTCO will provide after-hours phone coverage and respond to emergency and urgent calls until local Ombudsman program staff is available.

#### **XIV. 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 (ICF), and RCFEs. Ombudsman posters are not required to be posted in other types of facilities. The posters must be in the form approved by OSLTCO and must include the name, address, and telephone number of the local LTCOP as well as brief information about Ombudsman services and the toll-free CRISISline telephone number. The CRISISline poster provides an initial contact point at which residents, and persons acting on behalf of residents, can access Ombudsman services.

State law specifies that the poster 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.” (Welf. & Inst. Code § 9726(a)(3))

In SNFs and ICFs, there are four locations in which Ombudsman CRISISline posters must be conspicuously posted:

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

(Health and Safety Code § 1422.6)

Local Ombudsman programs are charged with the responsibility of delivering CRISISline posters to all new LTC facilities and to existing LTC facilities that are replacing posters. OSLTCO provides posters to the local LTCOPs upon request by telephone (916-419-7510) or email ([stateomb@aging.ca.gov](mailto:stateomb@aging.ca.gov))

## **XV. Evaluation of Telephone Service**

Local Ombudsman program coordinators or their designees shall assess staff and volunteers who handle calls on all local Ombudsman program telephone lines at least once a year for quality assurance. Local program coordinators shall inform paid staff and volunteers that incoming telephone lines will be monitored periodically without advance notice by the program coordinator. The program 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. OSLTCO recommends using the Long-Term Care Ombudsman Telephone Service Evaluation (OSLTCO S901) to document the evaluation of telephone response by local Ombudsman Program staff.

## **XVI. Telephone Techniques**

This section contains some techniques to assist staff and volunteers who are answering LTCOP telephones

### **Good telephone skills are important because:**

- The caller is counting on you for help.
- The person in distress needs to know you are listening.
- The caller must have confidence that the information you are providing is correct.
- Incomplete messages could have serious consequences.
- You represent the LTC Ombudsman Program and are an advocate for the resident.

### **Tips for responding to telephone calls:**

- Answer the telephone promptly. Callers may get discouraged after several rings and hang up.
- Identify yourself, "Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program. (your name) speaking."
- Be friendly and helpful. Be positive and project a professional image.
- Speak clearly. Talk at a pace that is easy to understand.

- Listen carefully. Be attentive.
- It may be helpful to devise a telephone contact sheet listing outside agencies or resources and keep a reference directory for call intake staff or volunteers. Ask for specific information from each caller and write down the information as it is being given to you:
  - Name. (Ask the caller to spell his or her name.)
  - Telephone number including area code.
  - Facility, city, county.
  - Reason for the call. Wait for the caller to explain the reason rather than make assumptions.
  - Determine if the caller has an emergency or urgent situation, or if the caller is requesting a routine Ombudsman visit, or needs information to help resolve a question.
- Verify all information by reading it back. Ask, “Is this correct?” Ask for the spelling of names, if necessary.
- If you must place a caller on hold, explain exactly what you are doing and how long it will take.
- Be attentive to any caller you put on hold. If someone is on hold for more than one or two minutes, return to the caller and state how much longer it will be before the call will be accepted. Ask if the caller wishes to remain on hold or would prefer to have someone return the call.
- If a caller is noticeably upset, or is calling about a crisis situation, avoid putting the person on hold. Get his or her information immediately. If possible, ask other staff to take other calls so you can attend to the caller with the crisis.
- If a specific staff person is not available, be tactful. For example, say, “Sandy is away from her desk. May I have her call you when she returns?” Statements such as “Sandy is out to lunch,” “Sandy is on her break,” or “Sandy is not in yet,” are less professional.
- Be patient and pleasant.
- Be sure your rosters and referral numbers are up-to-date and are accessible. Routinely verify referral numbers with the appropriate agencies.
- Know when to end a conversation. Be polite, but firm, if a conversation lasts too long. If required, politely remind the caller that other callers may be waiting for service.

- When making a referral, ask if the caller has a pencil and paper available to write down telephone numbers. It may be necessary to wait while the caller finds writing materials.
- If you tell a caller that someone will be calling back within a certain period of time and no one is available at the time, call back yourself, explain that there has been a delay, and when a call can be expected.
- If the caller is stressed, remain calm. The caller may not be angry or frustrated with you, but may be upset by frustrating circumstances.
- Callers may have called several other numbers or agencies to obtain assistance. Ombudsman program staff should do everything possible to ensure the caller is connected to the person or program that can provide help.
- If a speech impairment or language barrier makes it difficult or impossible to understand the caller, the following techniques may help:
  - Keep your voice calm and patient. Ask the caller to repeat the information.
  - Ask direct questions to which the caller can respond with a yes or no, such as,
    - “Do you live in a nursing home or assisted living facility?”
    - “Is this call an emergency?”
    - “Are you currently in danger?”
    - “Do you want to see an Ombudsman?”
  - If you are unable to understand the caller after several attempts, ask if he/she will spell the information you need (i.e., name, facility name or problem).
  - Be honest with the caller. If you cannot understand the caller, say “I’m sorry, I cannot understand you.” Ask if there is someone else who can explain what the caller needs to tell you.
- Practice the Golden Rule: Treat others as you would like to be treated.