

Tips for Ombudsman Program Communication

with Residents, Long-Term Care Facilities, Families, and the Public During COVID-19

Purpose

In-person visitation restrictions¹ imposed to reduce the spread of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) required Ombudsman programs to adapt quickly to ensure residents continue to have access to program services. In-person visits with residents are a core part of Ombudsman program outreach and advocacy and there is no substitute; however, during this crisis programs must use other means to connect with residents. This resource provides tips and examples to promote effective communication between the Ombudsman program and residents, families, providers, and the public when in-person visitation is limited.

Communication with Residents

General Outreach

Help residents understand why the Ombudsman program cannot visit while in-person visitation is restricted. Explain that the program is still available to assist them and tell them how to contact the program. You can share this information in a variety of ways:

- Mail letters to facilities and ask staff to distribute them to residents.
- Create a resident newsletter with advocacy tips, list of rights, and other pertinent information.
- Email Resident Council leadership and other residents.
- Email a letter to facilities and ask staff to print and share the letter with residents.
- Email or mail Ombudsman posters and/or flyers and ask facility staff to post them throughout the facility and on the outside of the facility's front door.
- Share via social media and on your program's website. Ensure information shared is current. Make content engaging (e.g., highlight one resident right a week with examples and articles related to that right).
- Create a brief video and share it on your website, social media, and send to state and local news broadcasts. Ask long-term care facilities to air the video on their internal channel, if available.

Connect with Residents

- Routinely request contact information for residents and resident representatives, including contact information for Resident and Family Council leadership. Establish regular contact with Resident and Family Council leadership and call/email other residents and resident representatives as often as possible.

¹CMS Ref: QSO-20-14-NH <https://www.cms.gov/files/document/3-13-2020-nursing-home-guidance-covid-19.pdf>

- o Ask residents if they have access to a computer, tablet, or smart phone, and if they are interested in video calls.
- o Ask residents if they have email addresses and if they would like to receive email updates or correspond through email.
- o Ask residents if they prefer that you contact their representative for ongoing communication.
- Contact Resident Council leadership in each facility on a regular basis.
- Contact residents and family members that were complainants in recent cases (prior to the visitation restrictions) to check in to see if they have current concerns and let them know the Ombudsman program is still available.
- Receive, investigate, and resolve complaints via phone, email, and video calls.
- Coordinate “window visits” with residents so you can communicate through a window or other designated space at the facility while you are outside the building but can still see and hear them. Speak with the facility about their process for visits and how they will ensure resident access. Programs have successfully used phones and other communication devices to make it easier to talk to each through windows. One program uses baby monitors so the receiver can be set up in the resident’s room without staff or the resident having to hold it during the conversation.
- Set-up an Ombudsman program table or space during outdoor visitation time so you are available to speak with residents and their visitors.

Visit the [NORC website](#) for state and local examples of window visits, letters and newsletters for residents, Facebook live events for residents and families, a promotional video, and other innovative ways to support and connect with residents.



Conversation Starters

Consider developing a script with talking points and questions to use during routine calls to residents and their representatives to offer support and answer questions or concerns.

Here are some example questions to use as conversation starters with residents after you introduce yourself, the program, and the purpose for your call. Share your contact information with each resident and encourage them to share it with their family members or other residents.

How are you?

Are your needs being met?

Do staff respond promptly when you use your call light or ask for assistance?

Have you noticed any changes that concern you?

Are you receiving your medications on time?

How are your meals?

Have you been able to communicate with your friends or family or other community members?

Do you have access to a computer, tablet, or a smart phone?

Are you interested in video calls?

Is there anything you can think of that would help you communicate with your loved ones better?

Do you have any questions or concerns?

Would you like to correspond by email if you have an email address?

Would you like for me to contact you or your representative for on-going communication?

Communication with Long-Term Care Facility Staff

Communication with providers is crucial and an integral link between you and residents while visits are limited as many residents need assistance with technology, do not have their own phone/tablet/computer, or you have to schedule window/outdoor visits. Examples of Ombudsman program communication with long-term care facility staff include:

- Send letters or emails to facility Administrators explaining the program's revised visiting policy, communication policy, and a reminder about the role and responsibilities of the program.
- Mail print materials about the program to facilities and ask them to share them with residents, family members, and others. NORC created a [free postcard template](#) in three downloadable options, including one with space to customize with program contact information.
- Ask the facility how they will ensure that residents have confidential communication and access to the Ombudsman program and share best practices to ensure access.
- Seek facility staff support to establish video calls with residents, if necessary.
- Encourage facility staff to distribute your email address as an alternate way to communicate with residents and family members or legal representatives. You may experience higher call volume due to COVID-19 and email may allow a shorter response time.
- Coordinate with the facility to identify a staff person for you to contact on a regular basis to check-in and address complaints.



Visit the [NORC website](#) for examples of questions for long-term care facility staff.

Communication with Resident Representatives, Families, and the Public

During this uncertain time, in addition to communicating with residents and long-term care facilities, it is important to share information with residents' family members and the public. Examples of communication with family members and the public include:

- Ensure your website has current information. Share information from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), and your state and local agencies regarding COVID-19 on your website and social media.
- Create a poster or flyer with information about the program, your name, and contact information, and ask facility staff to post it on the front entrance of long-term care facilities.
- Obtain contact information for Family Council members and reach out to members via phone or email periodically.
- Encourage concerned family members to start a Family Council and provide information regarding starting and facilitating meetings virtually.
- Host regular meetings by phone, video, or social media (e.g., Facebook Live) to share information with family members and the public, respond to questions, and hear about their experience. Invite policy makers to the meetings to listen to stories about how residents and their family members are impacted.
- Host virtual Family Council meetings. These can be for a single facility, regionally, or statewide.

- Contact elected officials to remind them that the program is a resource for their constituents.
- Coordinate with your supervisor and State Ombudsman to submit a press release regarding the role of the Ombudsman program, information regarding in-person visit restrictions, and how to contact the program.



Visit the [NORC website](#) for examples of virtual family council meetings, Facebook Live events, and other ideas for communicating with family members and the public.

Resources

Administration for Community Living (ACL)

<https://acl.gov/COVID-19>

Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS)

<https://www.cms.gov/outreach-education/partner-resources/coronavirus-covid-19-partner-toolkit>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>

NORC Resources

https://ltombudsman.org/omb_support/COVID-19

National Consumer Voice for Quality Long-Term Care (Consumer Voice)

- Coronavirus in Long-Term Care Facilities: Information for Advocates
<https://theconsumervoice.org/issues/other-issues-and-resources/covid-19>
- Coronavirus in Long-Term Care Facilities: Information for Residents and Families
<https://theconsumervoice.org/issues/other-issues-and-resources/covid-19/residents-families>

