

PURPOSE

Beyond being a welcome visitor, many family members are critical partners in the ongoing care and both physical and emotional support of persons living in Long Term Care Facilities (LTCFs) including nursing homes and residential care facilities (assisted living).

Since mid-March 2020, visitor restrictions have been implemented in LTCFs to help prevent and mitigate the spread of COVID-19. Although social distancing and physical separation are still important to keep residents safe, strategies are needed to combat the unintended consequences of prolonged social distancing and to maintain overall health and well-being. The COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated the challenges of social isolation and loneliness in the long-term care population. Feelings of loneliness can have deleterious consequences, including increased risk of depression, suicidal thoughts, aggressive behaviors and anxiety. Although technology can help decrease loneliness for some residents, many with cognitive impairment, visual and/or hearing difficulties, and mobility limitations will still struggle to maintain connections with their loved ones during these times.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recognizing the critical role family members and other outside caregivers (e.g., friends, volunteers, private personal caregivers) often have in the care and support of residents, it is recommended that LTCFs consider designating as Essential Family Caregivers (EFCs) those family members and other outside caregivers who, prior to visitor restrictions, were regularly engaged with the resident at least two or more times per week to provide companionship and/or assist with activities requiring one-on-one direction. The goal of EFCs is to help high-risk residents who are missing care previously provided by a loved one or outside caregiver.

The decision to designate an EFC should be individualized and integrated with person-centered care planning. Realizing both the potential benefits and risks of allowing additional “essential” caregivers into the building, LTCFs should carefully consider the current status of COVID-19 in their facility and local communities prior to designating EFCs. If LTCF residents have been cohorted by COVID-19 status, EFCs are allowed in COVID-19 negative (green) areas only.

Essential Family Caregiver (EFC)

- Designation is at the sole discretion of the LTCF executive director (or designee) and only upon agreement by the resident (and/or their representative). This designation and agreement should outline what support will be provided by the EFC.
- A family member or other outside caregiver (e.g., friend, volunteer, private personal caregiver) age 18 or older who provided regular (at least twice weekly) care and support to the resident before the pandemic.
- Schedule and amount of time in facility agreed upon in advance and no more than 2 hours per day (e.g., daily for 1 hour from Noon-1 p.m.).
- Provides care and support similar in nature as before the pandemic (e.g. help with meal set up, grooming, and companionship).

Essential Family Caregivers in Long-term Care Facilities

- A mask must be worn at all times while in the building, and frequent hand hygiene performed (other PPE may be required depending on care provided). If the support to be provided requires additional PPE, the EFC should meet with the facility's infection control lead to be instructed on proper use prior to providing support.
- Physical distancing must be maintained with staff and other residents while in building.
- Sign-in upon arrival with screening as required of facility staff; agree to monitor their own symptoms and limit contacts outside the facility.
- A negative COVID-19 test is required before the EFC may be scheduled for support, and the EFC is subject to any regular testing required of facility staff.

Restriction or revocation of EFC status is at the sole discretion of the LTCF executive director (or designee), for example, of an individual who fails to follow physical distancing, PPE or other COVID-19 related rules.

COMMUNICATIONS

Implementation of EFCs should be accompanied by pre-planning and communications with facility staff, residents, and their designated representatives. LTCFs should provide information on plans for EFCs and the intended return of care and support by family members and outside caregivers needed by residents vs. general family visitation that will come at a later date. It will also be important to share information on the COVID-19 status of the facility with the EFCs.

RESOURCES

Additional information and resources for COVID-19 are available at the links below.

- Person-Centered Guidelines for Preserving Family Presence in Challenging Times:
<https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/3839253/Downloads/Guidelines%20on%20Preserving%20Family%20Presence%20During%20Challenging%20Times%205.28.20.pdf>
- CDC COVID-19 webpage: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/>
- ISDH COVID-19 webpage: <https://coronavirus.in.gov>

This policy will go into effect one week (7 days) from the date of posting.