

Nursing Home Visitation Rules Amid COVID-19

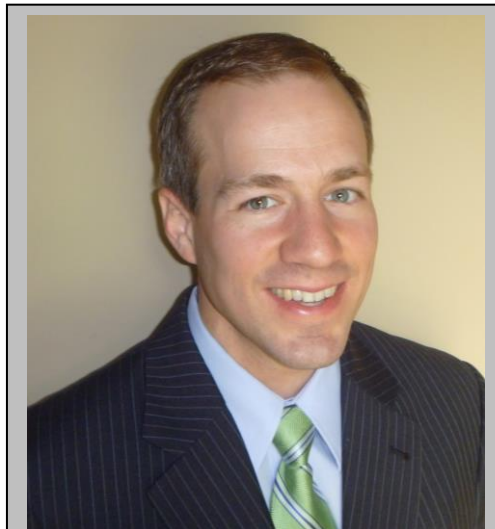
Virtually everyone can agree that COVID-19 has altered our way of life. Business closures, quarantines, and social distancing have become a new normal. Many now wear face masks in public and carry hand sanitizer with them. Those in nursing homes faced a new normal of restricted visitation and group activities. In this issue of ElderCounselor™, we will explore the state of nursing home visitation, how those restrictions may ease, and how to still stay in touch with seniors during the pandemic.

The pandemic

Earlier this year, COVID-19 swept across the globe with a quickness. It was quickly noted that seniors had a higher rate of severe COVID-19, including a higher death rate. In fact, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has found that eight out of ten deaths due to COVID-19 occurs in someone aged 65 and older. In late June, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) released preliminary data that found there were great disparities among Medicare beneficiaries based upon race, ethnicity, and age. Folks who were enrolled in both Medicare and Medicaid were four times more likely than those only enrolled in Medicare to be hospitalized for COVID-19. Because of the susceptibility of seniors, many nursing homes have closed their doors to visitors and non-essential healthcare personnel, and have eliminated group activities, such as communal dining and entertainment events.

The state of nursing home visitation

In May, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) issued recommendations for nursing homes, reopening their doors to visitors and non-essential healthcare personnel. The recommendation covered the criteria for relaxing restrictions, allowing visitors, and restoring activities. In order to make decisions in each of these areas, the memorandum outlined phases for progression. The memorandum was targeted at state officials making these decisions in each state. State officials could require all facilities within the state to pass through each phase at the same time, go region by region, or permit each nursing home to move through phases



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at their own pace. It was recommended that nursing homes spend a minimum of 14 days in each phase.

When deciding to move from one phase or another, the following must occur:

- No new community or facility COVID-19 cases
- The nursing home has adequate staffing
- The nursing home has access to adequate testing
- There are protective protocols in place for the facility, such as social distancing, hand washing, and mask usage
- Local hospitals must have some capacity to accept new patients
- Staff must have access to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

Phase One:

Phase One was the current state of affairs at the time of CMS's publication in mid-May. Visitation was prohibited, except for compassionate care cases. And in those cases, precautions must be taken, such as hand hygiene and mask usage. Non-essential healthcare personnel were restricted from entry into the nursing home. Communal dining was eliminated or drastically limited. Non-medically necessary trips outside the nursing home were eliminated.

Phase Two:

In Phase Two, visitation is still generally prohibited, except for compassionate care cases. As with Phase One, any visitor to the facility must take precautions, such as mask usage. However, in Phase Two, a limited number of non-essential healthcare personnel would be allowed. These would be people deemed necessary by the facility. Again, precautions would still need to be taken, such as face masks, hand hygiene, and social distancing. Group activities of less than ten residents would be allowed but would be limited to residents who were COVID-19 negative. Communal dining would be allowed, but social distancing would be imposed in that dining space.

Phase Three:

Phase Three allows for visitation with the precautions of social distancing, hand hygiene, and mask usage. Non-essential healthcare personnel would also be allowed in, with those same precautions. Communal dining would continue to be limited to those that can safely and effectively social distance. Group activities would not be limited to only ten residents. Rather, the activities attendance limit would be the number of people that can safely and effectively social distance in the location of the activity.

Of course, individual states are allowed to implement these guidelines as they see fit. For example, Vermont issued rules on June 17 that stated visitors are permitted at long-term care facilities – visits must be held outdoors and can include up to two visitors per resident each day. On June 29, Kentucky issued rules that stated visitation would resume as of July 15, as would group activities of 10 folks or less and communal dining. States that allow or are considering allowing outside visits include Connecticut, Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Missouri, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Vermont, and Wisconsin. To confirm whether a specific nursing home allows visitation

at all, you can contact the nursing home directly or the state health department.

Are nursing home residents subject to mandatory federal COVID-19 testing? No. The decision to test a resident for the virus is up to their physician or healthcare provider, consistent with state and local rules. However, CMS recommends that nursing homes have a comprehensive plan for testing. CMS recommends that each resident be given a baseline test for COVID-19 and then be retested if that resident comes into contact with an individual who has symptoms of COVID-19, or if an employee of the nursing home tests positive for COVID-19. For nursing home staff, CMS recommends an initial baseline test for COVID-19, and then weekly tests thereafter.

Ways to still stay in touch with seniors

As visitation at nursing homes begins to resume on a state-by-state basis, those who want to visit with those seniors will once again be able to have in-person contact with them. However, these reopenings will be implemented during different time periods depending upon the state and region. Also, it is quite possible that the continued spread of the virus may dictate that the nursing home once again close its doors to visitors. Until the threat of COVID-19 ultimately passes, what are some other ways that one can still be in touch with a senior living in a nursing home?

Snail mail still exists and can be handy when keeping in touch with seniors in a nursing home. Send a care package, a meal via delivery, or some flowers. Even a nice card would surely be appreciated. Letters from family, friends, and caregivers would be a welcome surprise for the resident. Items sent via snail mail work great for seniors who have difficulty using technology, or for seniors who have dementia, so they can re-read the correspondence at a later date.

Some nursing homes will allow a resident to communicate through a closed window. You can call the senior on the phone while outside the closed window. Or, if the visitor is standing far enough away from the window, maybe the resident could open the window to effectuate voice communication.

There are many online groups and communities, such as book clubs and bingo games, that a senior can get involved in to interact with other people. These can be found on websites such as Facebook, Oscar Senior, and AARP. Companies like Senior Planet and Coursera offer free education courses to seniors.

Audio-video technology, such as Skype, Duo, or Zoom, has become a major way to stay in touch with seniors during their isolation. If a senior doesn't know how to use this technology, reach out to community resources for education. For example, there is an organization in Albuquerque, New Mexico called Teeniors, that focuses on educating seniors with the use of technology. During the pandemic, teens will offer up to 30 free one-on-one sessions for local seniors. This coaching is done virtually, and lessons are also provided in Spanish. If such an organization doesn't exist in your community, create one!

The important thing to remember is to get creative and still reach out to those seniors in a nursing home; however, that can be safely done. Isolation brings with it loneliness, which can have devastating effects on the senior's physical and mental health. In fact, a study found that feeling alone increases the risk of death by 26%; social isolation increases the risk of death by 29%. Nursing home residents need to know that they are not expendable; they are valued members of our society, and we are willing to put in the work to stay in touch and know they are safe.

It is also important to educate seniors on correct information that comes out in relation to COVID-19. Many people nowadays get their “news” from social media or elsewhere on the internet. Ensure that the senior isn’t getting misinformation, but instead is correctly informed about the virus, ways to protect themselves, and the state of what can safely be accomplished at the given time.

Finally, reach out to nursing homes to see how one can help. Could the nursing home benefit from donations of time or money? Does the facility have enough masks or PPE? Can you be teamed up with a resident who doesn’t have family or friends to be their new support system? Employees are likely working extra hard to keep residents from being lonely, such as playing board games with them or helping them with technology to stay in touch with family and friends. Show extra support and consideration for these hard-working folks.

Hopefully, there will soon be a day when COVID-19 isn’t a serious threat to seniors. We can then get back to visiting in-person, dining together, and taking seniors out for activities. Until that day comes, it is important to still find ways to interact with residents of nursing homes, to battle isolation, give hope, and stay in touch.

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