

NEWS RELEASE | **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE** | April 21, 2020

Program can help families resolve concerns when COVID-19 prevents them from visiting loved ones in long-term care facilities

BISMARCK, N.D. – Family members and friends are adjusting to visitor restrictions and other changes put in place to protect the health and well-being of the 9,600 individuals who reside in long-term care facilities in North Dakota. Residents of nursing homes, basic care, assisted living and hospital swing bed facilities are at higher risk of COVID-19 complications.

In March, the North Dakota Department of Health's Health Facilities Division team visited long-term care facilities to review infection control practices and provide technical assistance. The agency has continued to support facilities by providing information about Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommendations on screening individuals for symptoms, social distancing in group care settings, cleaning and sanitizing and other measures.

Long-term care facility residents and their loved ones who have concerns about health, safety, well-being and residents' rights are encouraged to continue to reach out the North Dakota Department of Human Services' Long-Term Care Ombudsman program. Program staff advocate on behalf of long-term care residents and work with residents, families, facilities and state health department partners to open the lines of communication and resolve issues.

"Long-term care facilities are working hard to protect individuals from COVID-19 and to maintain quality care, and we appreciate that," said State Long-Term Care Ombudsman Karla Backman of the Department of Human Services' Aging Services Division. "The majority of individuals understand the reason for recent changes in care and visitation. The pandemic is creating unique issues."

She said families want to know how their loved ones are doing and what facilities are doing in response to COVID-19. Families want to know the options available to talk to loved ones and caregivers regularly.

"During this challenging time, it is important facilities continue to focus on person-centered care and protection in a way that reflects individual needs and preferences," Backman said. "We know many long-term care service providers are being creative to prevent loneliness and isolation, while supporting social distancing and other infection control measures. One part of that is facilitating virtual visits between residents and their families."

Backman and six local long-term care ombudsmen who are based in Bismarck, Devils Lake, Dickinson, Fargo, and Minot serve the entire state. Because of COVID-19-related visitor restrictions, the ombudsmen are not currently visiting facilities in person, but are available by phone and other technology to advocate for residents and families.

These advocates can be reached at dhsagingombud@nd.gov or by calling the state's Aging and Disability Resource Link toll-free at 855-462-5465, selecting option 3, and asking for the Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program.

"Facilities are busy. They are working hard to care for people, and the ombudsman program can help families process the fears and emotions related to COVID-19 and related restrictions and facilitate communication with facilities," she said.

The Office of the State Long-Term Care Ombudsman is a programmatically independent advocacy service located within the North Dakota Department of Human Services' Aging Services Division. The program receives, investigates and works to resolve concerns affecting long-term care residents, and advocates for residents' health, safety and rights. Program information, including how to report concerns, is online at www.nd.gov/dhs/services/adultsaging/ombudsman.html.

For more information about resources for individuals and families and the Department of Human Services' response to COVID-19, visit www.nd.gov/dhs/info/covid-19/index.html.

For health-related information on COVID-19, visit the North Dakota Department of Health's website at www.health.nd.gov/diseases-conditions/coronavirus.

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