



HOUSTON-GALVESTON AREA COUNCIL

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H-GAC OMBUDSMAN PROGRAM ENCOURAGES PATIENCE, COMPASSION, AND CREATIVE SOLUTIONS TO KEEP SENIORS ACTIVE AND CONNECTED DURING COVID-19

HOUSTON, TX – The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid has outlined critical steps nursing homes and assisted living facilities should take to prior to relaxing restrictions implemented to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and fully re-opening. As nursing homes and assisted living facilities work to implement these measures, social isolation is a growing concern among families, advocates, and officials. Though measures such as restricting on-site visits, social distancing, and quarantine are in place for the health and safety of seniors, they can also lead to quality of life concerns like feelings of isolation, depression, and under-eating. To combat social isolation, facilities have developed creative ways to help engage residents and keep them connected with families.

The Houston-Galveston Area Agency on Aging long-term care ombudsman program advocates for seniors living in nursing homes and assisted living facilities in all of the 13 counties the Houston-Galveston Area Council serves except for Harris County. Since the pandemic hit Texas and stay at home orders were issued, ombudsmen have been maintaining contact with area long-term care facilities, their residents, and family members through virtual means and by phone. According to Lisa Hayes, managing local ombudsman at the Area Agency on Aging, feelings of isolation and loneliness among residents are a challenge at many retirement communities in the region.

“We recognize that families are eager to see their loved ones in person, especially as they see other types of businesses and facilities reopening in their communities. There’s a delicate balancing act going on as long-term care facilities work to comply with state and federal guidelines while constantly working to ensure the safety and quality of life of the residents,” said Hayes. “Just as people have been creative with virtual meetings and games in their homes, many long-term care facilities are adopting creative solutions to keep their residents active, engaged, and connected with their loved ones.”

To help seniors stay in touch with relatives, Hayes says, many facilities are scheduling window-side visits – where family members can see and talk to residents from outside their bedroom window – and by setting residents up with video chat technology. Texas is currently taking grant applications from nursing homes for tablets for the purpose of residents videoconferencing with families. To help seniors stay entertained while maintaining proper social distancing, facilities have organized activities like remote car races, hallway games, and art events. Members of the community can help by donating board games and activity supplies to nursing homes and assisted living facilities in their area.

“Mental wellness goes hand-in-hand with physical wellness. Maintaining social contact and connection with family are critical parts of maintaining seniors’ mental wellness. It’s gratifying to see so many of our region’s long-term care facilities recognize this and are taking creative steps to maintain those connections,” said Hayes.

Hayes says to help ensure residents are properly eating, family members can schedule window-side visits or video chats around lunch or dinner time. They can also send cards, pictures, and other meaningful items from home.

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H-GAC is a voluntary association of local governments and local elected officials from the 13-county Gulf Coast planning region, which includes an area of 12,500 square miles and more than 7 million people. H-GAC works to promote efficient and accountable use of local, state, and federal tax dollars; serves as a problem-solving and information forum for local governments; and helps analyze trends and conditions affecting the region. For more information, visit h-gac.com.



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“Eating is a social activity, and many residents with depression or dementia need to be encouraged to eat,” said Hayes. “If you are unable to visit, see if your loved one and his or her roommate can be seated to face each other during meals. Also, ask for your loved one’s weight.”

For more than 45 years, the Older Americans Act has authorized long-term care ombudsmen to advocate for residents in nursing homes and assisted living facilities. Ombudsmen provide information and education to residents and families about resident rights, nursing home compliance, how to select a nursing home, and eligibility criteria. They also investigate and work to resolve complaints by or on behalf of long-term care facility residents, and they conduct regular site visits to talk with residents and ensure facilities are providing adequate care and complying with rules and regulations.

More information about COVID-19 guidelines at nursing homes and assisted living facilities is available on the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid website at: www.cms.gov/medicareprovider-enrollment-and-certificationsurveycertificationgeninfopolicy-and-memos-states-and/nursing-home-reopening-recommendations-state-and-local-officials. The Texas Department of Health and Human Services also has helpful information about staying connected with loved ones in long-term care facilities at: <https://hhs.texas.gov/services/health/coronavirus-covid-19/coronavirus-covid-19-information-people-receiving-services>.

Families with questions about their loved one’s long-term care facility policies should contact the facility directly. However, if they are having trouble reaching the facility, getting answers to their questions, staying in contact with their loved one, or getting updates on their loved one’s status, they can reach out to an ombudsman for help. Ombudsman services are complimentary, and calls are confidential.

“We are always happy to discuss COVID-19 policies and guidelines with relatives, as the guidance does change,” said Hayes. “We also are handling the same issues that we do during normal times, such as improper discharges and concerns in care and in quality of life. Even during COVID-19, we are here to give residents a voice.”

The Houston-Galveston Area Agency on Aging ombudsman program can be contacted at 713-495-4507. Residents living in Harris County can contact the Harris County ombudsman program for assistance at 713-500-9930.

For more information about the Houston-Galveston Area Agency on Aging, visit h-gac.com/area-agency-on-aging/.

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