

NURSING HOME CARE



A Citizens' Guide to Making Informed Decisions During the COVID-19 Pandemic

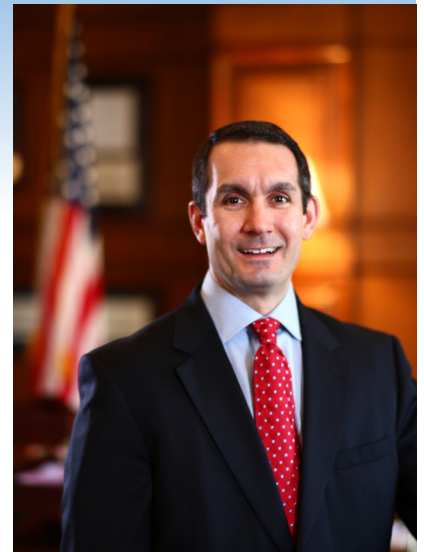
INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

In 2016, my audit of the state Department of Health's (DOH) oversight of Pennsylvania's more than 700 nursing homes showed deficiencies and how they impacted the quality of care provided to Pennsylvania's approximately 90,000 nursing home residents.

DOH immediately started to implement some of my recommendations relating to staffing levels, sanctions against poor-performing facilities and handling of complaints.

At that time, my team and I developed a guide, "[Nursing Home Care: A Citizens' Guide to Informed Decision Making](#)," to help people make informed decisions about choosing a nursing home for loved ones.

Due to the outbreak of COVID-19, we created this guide to supplement that information and specifically focus on how to keep loved ones safe in long-term living facilities during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Auditor General
Eugene DePasquale

Inside this guide

- Guidance for residents and families:
What to do, what to ask
- Know your rights
- Guidelines for facilities
- How to take action on your concerns

COVID-19's IMPACT ON OLDER ADULTS & CARE FACILITIES

Coronavirus can spread easily in environments where people live or work in close proximity to one another.

Thousands of cases of COVID-19 were reported in Pennsylvania's nursing and personal care homes in the first half of 2020.

As of the date this guide was published, approximately two-thirds of all reported COVID-19 deaths took place in such facilities.

GUIDANCE FOR RESIDENTS AND FAMILIES

Whether you live in one of Pennsylvania's nursing homes or you have a loved one who lives there, here's how best to stay safe during this overwhelming and unprecedented time.

I AM A RESIDENT

WHAT TO DO

As a resident, you can take several steps to help promote safe care, including:

- **Washing your hands regularly** and reminding other residents to do so as well.
- **Practicing physical distancing** by adhering to the "6 feet away" guidelines and **wearing a mask**.
- **Informing your facility's administration** if you see staff not taking necessary safety steps to help stop the spread of COVID-19.
- **Requesting regular updates** from administrators about what the facility is doing to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

WHAT TO ASK

Staying safe includes having important information to help you make informed decisions. That includes knowing what questions to ask. For example:

- If you have concerns about the facility's **infection control plan**, ask the director of nursing or administrator what they will do to address your concerns.
- Ask the facility to share the results of its **self-assessment of its infection control practices**.
- Ask nursing home staff to schedule a **regular time to communicate with your family or loved ones** and to assist you if you need help connecting.
- Ask nursing home activities staff to find **creative ways to continue regular activities** while practicing physical distancing, even if it is in your room.

MY LOVED ONE IS IN A NURSING HOME

First and foremost, make sure your loved one's facility has your current emergency contact information.

In addition, ask the administrator to seek permission from other residents' families to share email addresses. Families can then create a group email to communicate with each other and collectively bring questions and concerns to the facility.

WHAT TO ASK

AARP suggests you ask staff and administrators the following questions during the pandemic:

Has anyone in the nursing home tested positive for COVID-19?

This includes residents, staff and vendors.

What is the nursing home doing to prevent infections?

Request the screening plan for staff when they leave and reenter the facility and the precautions for residents not in private rooms.

Do staff have the personal protective equipment (PPE) needed to stay safe and keep their patients safe?

PPE includes masks, face shields, gowns and gloves. Also ask if staff received training on proper PPE use.

What is the nursing home doing to help residents stay connected with family or other loved ones?

Does the nursing home help residents make phone or video calls, and is there a regular facility schedule?

What is the plan for the nursing home to regularly communicate information to residents and families?

Ask if it will be by phone or email and when it will be distributed.

Is the nursing home currently at full staffing levels for nurses, aides and other workers?

Ask for the facility's plan to make sure residents' needs are met if there is a staffing shortage.

KNOW YOUR RIGHTS

While changes and limitations have been temporarily enacted because of the pandemic, you still have the right to voice grievances without discrimination or retaliation, or the fear of it. Facilities must react promptly to resolve grievances.

GUIDELINES FOR LONG-TERM CARE FACILITIES

If there is a confirmed case in your facility, staff and administrators should take certain actions.

The Pennsylvania Health Care Association (PHCA) has released a nine-step action plan for long-term care facilities to follow once they have a confirmed case of COVID-19. Residents and their families should inquire to find out if immediate steps were taken to do the following:

- isolate a resident who tests positive,
- inform residents and staff of the positive case, and
- mobilize its contact tracing program.

PHCA outlines all nine steps at www.phca.org.

ASSISTED LIVING/PERSONAL CARE FACILITIES

Assisted living facilities and personal care homes are not the same as long-term care facilities. There are distinct differences, with the main one being that assisted living facilities and personal care homes, which are similar to apartment-like living, do not provide skilled nursing care.

According to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), if a resident of these facilities thinks they have COVID-19, administrators should contact local health officials as well as ask the resident to self-isolate.

If a case is confirmed, the CDC advises facilities to:

- Cancel all group activities
- Limit visitors to essential staff
- Have all residents monitor their health for COVID-19 symptoms
- Properly clean and disinfect shared areas
- Work with local health authorities to communicate the possible exposure to all residents, staff and visitors.

TAKING ACTION ON CONCERNS

If you suspect a nursing home isn't following CDC guidelines, the first step is to let facility administrators know about your concerns. Be sure to document whom you spoke with and what actions were promised.

Facilities keep "grievance logs," which are used to document resident issues. Confirm that your grievance is recorded in the log so that a record exists of your complaint. This establishes an official paper trail for outside review, such as by the Department of Health.

QUALITY-OF-CARE CONCERNS

For serious quality-of-care concerns, or if your issue is not resolved through the facility, then contact the **Department of Health** directly. You can call their Complaint Hotline at **1-800-254-5164**, email c-ncomplai@pa.gov or use the online complaint form at www.health.pa.gov.

You may also contact the state Department of Aging's **Long-Term Care Ombudsman** for assistance by calling **717-783-8975** or going to www.aging.pa.gov.

The state **Attorney General's Office** also has set up a public email for reports of COVID-19-related neglect in the state's nursing homes: neglect-COVID@attorneygeneral.gov.