Coronavirus Crisis:
Nursing Home Visitation Guidelines as of 3/12/20

In an effort to slow the spread of the new COVID-19 virus to vulnerable elders in long term care, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), which regulates most skilled nursing homes, has issued strict guidelines (https://www.cms.gov/files/document/qso-20-14-nh-revised.pdf) on visitation to skilled nursing facilities. While many homes will limit or even halt visitors in response to these new recommendations, families and friends of residents will continue to play a crucial role in keeping tabs on their loved ones during this public health crisis.

Both federal and state law provides that residents of skilled nursing facilities have the right to receive visitors (42 USC Section 1395i-3(c)(3); Cal. Health & Safety Code Section 1418.3). These laws recognize that visitors and family members provide a critical safety net for nursing home residents by ensuring that their loved ones are clean, fed, and cared for. In many facilities, especially in rural areas, these visitors may be the only effective oversight for long term care.

However, in response to current fears about the spread of the virus, regulators assert that county health authorities and facilities have the power to restrict or even stop visitors as a means of infection control, and that they should do so given the increased frequency of community spread of the pathogen.

Specifically, the CMS urges that facilities restrict access for visitors who show signs of transmissible infection, specifically those who:

- Have signs or symptoms of a respiratory infection, such as fever, cough, shortness of breath, or sore throat.

- Have, in the last 14 days, had contact with someone with a confirmed diagnosis of COVID19, or under investigation for COVID-19, or are ill with respiratory illness.

- Had international travel within the last 14 days to countries with sustained community transmission.

- Reside in a community where community-based spread of COVID-19 is occurring.

Restriction means not allowing the visitor in at all, until they no longer meet the criteria above.
CMS recommends that so long as individuals do not meet the above criteria, facilities can allow entry but may require visitors to use Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) such as facemasks. If the facility does not have PPE, the CMS states that the facility should restrict the individual’s visit and ask them to come back at a later date (e.g., after 14 days with no symptoms of COVID-19).

CMS recommends that **when visitation is necessary or allowable, facilities should make efforts to allow for safe visitation for residents and loved ones.** For example: creating dedicated visiting areas (e.g., “clean rooms”) near the entrance to the facility where residents can meet with visitors in a sanitized environment.

If visitors are allowed, and even if they feel well, **they must make special efforts to avoid spreading the virus** to residents of facilities who are especially susceptible to the virus. This means using good hand hygiene, keeping about six feet from other people when possible, and using PPE as recommended. Facilities must ensure that visitors are educated about proper hand hygiene and the use of protective equipment.

These new guidelines **should not discourage close relationships with people in long term care** during this health crisis. Even if physical visits are not possible, friends and families of nursing home residents should monitor the wellbeing of their loved ones as closely as possible. Facilities should be asked for alternative means of communication, such as skype, Facebook, or telephone, and should be asked to provide regular updates by telephone or email regarding any developments.

Families and friends of residents should reach out to one another using email, text, or even “phone trees” to exchange information. CANHR provides information here ([http://www.canhr.org/familycouncils/](http://www.canhr.org/familycouncils/)) about creating “family councils”, but even without a formal council, families and friends of residents can form strong communities to support one another, stay informed, and check on residents. The facility ombudsman may be able to assist in this effort.

Finally, **the coronavirus crisis in no way restricts the access of residents and their families to the ombudsman program.** The name and contact information of the facility ombudsman should be displayed in public areas in the facility, but the ombudsman can also be located at the state website: [https://www.aging.ca.gov/Find_Services_in_My_County/](https://www.aging.ca.gov/Find_Services_in_My_County/).