

COVID-19 poses a unique threat to long-term care residents.

If you or your loved one is in a long-term care facility, you may be scared about the virus, the strain it could put on the facility's resources, and how that affects residents' rights to quality care and visitation.

The Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program of Legal Aid Chicago* advocates for the rights of residents in long term care facilities.

Every day, ombudsmen are visiting long-term care facilities to provide information and assistance to LTC residents and their loved ones. Especially at this time, you can help us do our job by calling us with your concerns, questions, or observations.

If you have a concern about someone in a long-term care facility, information you would like to share, or a question about long-term care facilities and COVID-19, please contact us using the information below.

In addition, official guidance on long-term care facilities and COVID-19 is available from the [CDC](#), [Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services](#), and [Illinois Department of Public Health](#).

If you feel someone is at immediate risk in a long-term care facility, please contact the Illinois Department of Public Health at 1-800-252-4343 or dph.ccr@illinois.gov.

*If you are a resident in a long-term care facility, have access to a phone, and would like to speak to a trained counselor about your distress during this difficult time, **please call 1-800-985-5990 or text TalkWithUs to 66746.***

*Our program serves Lake and suburban Cook County, except Evanston. If you live in Evanston, Chicago, or other parts of Illinois, find your [regional Ombudsman Program](#) here. We work in skilled nursing facilities, supportive living facilities, assisted living facilities, intermediate care facilities (ICFs and ICF-DDs), and specialized mental health and rehabilitation facilities (SMHRFs).



888.401.8200

Monday to Friday
between 8AM and 4:30PM

Or



Email

ombudsman@legalaidchicago.org

The facility is not letting visitors in. Can they do that?

No. While visitation was paused for a while, that is over. The state and federal government have told long-term care facilities that they must allow visitors “for all residents at all times.” However, a nursing home may require visitors to follow certain rules to prevent the spread of COVID, such as wearing a close-fitting mask during the visit. If you believe that the nursing home is interfering with your loved one’s right to have visitors, contact the Ombudsman Program.

The facility is not letting residents out. Can they do that?

No. Illinois long-term care facilities have been told that they must allow residents to leave the facility as they choose. Additionally, a resident does not need to quarantine when they return, except for limited cases, for example, if the resident came into close contact with COVID-19 while outside the nursing home or developed symptoms of COVID-19 after the outing. If the facility’s policy on this issue is affecting you, contact the Ombudsman Program.

How can I keep in touch with my loved one while they are in a long-term care facility?

Although the doors to nursing homes were once closed because of the pandemic, that time is over. Nursing homes must allow visitors. If you are willing to visit your loved one and to follow the nursing home’s safety protocols, like wearing a facemask and/or social distancing, you can visit in person.

If you are unable to visit in person, skilled nursing facility residents also have a right to private phone calls. If you have been unable to reach your loved one by phone, contact the Ombudsman Program. Many facilities can help with FaceTime or other videoconferencing options. To find out if this is available, try calling the front desk or the activities director at the long-term care facility. We have also heard of family members visiting at residents’ windows and sending letters.

Should I take my loved one home?

The congregate living setting of a long-term care facility does put individuals already vulnerable to COVID-19 at greater risk, and you may have additional fears about the facility’s readiness to handle this crisis. Before making this decision, think about:

- Will you or other professionals be able to provide the care that is needed?
- Will the facility readmit your loved one once the crisis has passed? If Medicaid or other insurance is paying for the long-term care facility, could this impact future coverage?
- Was your loved one exposed to COVID-19? Could they expose other vulnerable members of the household?
- Have all members of the receiving household been able to socially distance? If other members of the household have to go out to work, can your loved one be isolated from them?
- Is my loved one vaccinated? Have the other members of the household been vaccinated, decreasing the risk of transmitting the virus?



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If my loved one cannot participate in group activities, how can they stay busy?

Facilities should be offering group activities for people to partake in while wearing masks and social distancing. However, if your loved one cannot join or does not feel safe joining those activities, we have heard of some creative ideas that you can recommend to the Activities Director, such as:

- Bingo over the PA system
- Activities and exercises from room doorways
- Postagram letter writing between residents
- Music/entertainment from the parking lot
- Individualized knitting/painting/ arts and crafts

Is anyone still overseeing the facilities?

Yes. The Illinois Department of Public Health is the agency that regulates most types of long-term care facilities in Illinois. They are not entering facilities as much as usual, but they are still entering to respond to complaints that involve a risk of serious harm. If you believe that abuse or gross neglect is taking place, or if you believe that the long-term care facility is not taking adequate infection control measures, you may wish to make a complaint to the Illinois Department of Public Health. The Ombudsman Program can help you file this complaint.

What can I do as a community member?

If you are sick, or if you have been exposed to someone with COVID-19, stay home. Facility staff live in the community. If you spread the virus to one of these professionals, they could pass it on to a resident.

Show residents of nursing homes that they are still part of our community by visiting or calling your family member, friend, or neighbor who lives in a nursing home, or by having your kids make cards to send to residents.

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