For Immediate Release: Monday, August 31, 2020

State Ombuds Reacts to Governor’s Plan for Reopening Long-Term Care

Ombuds will re-enter facilities after nearly 6 months suspension of visits

Statement of Patricia Hunter, WA LTC Ombuds

Washington’s most vulnerable population was hit first, and hit hardest, by COVID-19. More than half of all COVID-related deaths in our state are tied to long term care facilities. Residents of long term care and nursing homes and their families have experienced tragic impacts from the virus. Just as devastating, is the mounting collateral damage to residents’ physical and emotional wellbeing resulting from nearly 6 months of prolonged social isolation.

The Washington State Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program is required by federal and state laws to advocate for the nearly 70,000 residents living in 4,000 long-term homes across our state. We provide independent oversight and complaint resolution to ensure quality of care, and to voice the concerns of residents whose own voices too often go unheard.

For the first time since early March, long-term care Ombuds will begin to enter long-term care facilities to visit residents who have essentially been on “lock down” since the pandemic first hit. When COVID began to spread in Washington long-term care facilities in early March, the Program relieved all Ombuds from the duty to visit long-term care facilities in person. Many Volunteer Ombuds are over 60, and therefore at an increased risk of severe illness from COVID-19. For the past six months, long-term care Ombuds have continued to offer services to residents by phone, email, and video chat.

Ombuds staff and volunteers have been undergoing training and preparation to begin their limited re-entry to facilities. When possible, Ombuds visit residents outdoors, via window visits, and continue to provide complaint resolution and information by phone and web based technologies. Residents and families rely on us to help resolve conflicts, and provide independent checks on the quality of care being provided in homes.
We encourage anyone interested in helping residents of long term care and nursing homes to apply to become a volunteer ombuds to contact their local ombudsman program by visiting www.waombudsman.org or call 1-800-562-6028. If you have a complaint or concern about the care or well-being of someone living in a nursing home, assisted living or adult family home, please contact your local ombuds for assistance. All calls are at no cost and confidential.

We applaud Governor Inslee’s plan for nursing homes and other care facilities to safely re-open in phases designed to follow best practices and guidance from public health experts. We are grateful for the Governor’s leadership in taking timely and difficult steps to protect Washingtonians, and to create measured, science-based plans for safely reopening homes where our most vulnerable residents live.

At the request of the LTC Ombudsman Program and other advocates, the Governor included “Essential Support Persons” in the re-opening plan, as a way to allow a designated person in the resident’s life to enter the building and provide much-needed support and care to that resident. Often, a certain family member or friend is a critical lifeline for a resident who has cognitive decline, anxiety, depression, or another psychological issue. These visitors are key to monitoring their resident’s care and coordinating and facilitating care with the facility.

Additionally, the governor has broadened one of the exceptions to the visitation ban—“compassionate care” visitation. The definition has been broadened past the former limit of hospice to now include residents who are at the end of life but may not be “actively” dying and residents who have psychosocial needs. This development is something to applaud. Prior to the new plan, some facilities were refusing visitations when residents were on hospice because according to some “not dying”. The ombuds also received complaints from families that hospice services were not being allowed into the building.

Also at the request of the LTC Ombudsman Program and other advocates, the Governor has formed a formal advisory group of long term care stakeholders to provide ongoing input into COVID-19 policy and to coordinate and collaborate on system response. Representatives from the Governor’s Office, the State Long-term Care Ombudsman Program, provider associations, AARP, the State Developmental Disabilities Ombuds Program, the Department of Health and Department of Health and Social Services are just a few of the members.

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For more information or to schedule an interview with Patricia Hunter State LTC Ombuds in long term care, please contact Kristin Hyde 206-491-0773, kristin@kristinhyde.com

The Washington State Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program is operated by Multi-Service Center. Multi-Service Center is a 501(c)(3) non-profit agency that offers people pathways out of poverty through support and resources in education, employment, housing, energy assistance, food, and clothing. More information can be found online at www.mschelps.org