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What Long-Term Care Reopening Looks Like for Iowa Families

By Brent Willett, President and CEO, Iowa Health Care Association

Iowans have faced daunting and unprecedented challenges due to COVID-19, and no one has faced as much adversity as those with a loved one in a long-term care facility. For these families, not only are their medically fragile loved ones far more susceptible to the virus, but they have had to adjust to additional safety precautions, such as not being able to visit in person.

Visit restriction protocols were implemented thanks to recommendations provided in early March by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [Centers for Medicaid & Medicare Services](#), and the [Iowa Department of Inspections and Appeals](#). While these precautions have been necessary to protect residents and save lives, the inability to visit loved ones in-person has created enormous strain on families. With new COVID-era protocols in place in Iowa long-term care facilities, it is now appropriate to turn to the plan to allow in-person visits under certain conditions to resume.

This week, the Iowa Department of Public Health issued [new guidance](#) to help nursing facilities navigate this complicated landscape. This guidance calls for a phased approach to allowing in-person visits. The Iowa Center for Assisted Living has provided similar guidance to Iowa's assisted living facilities.

Based on this guidance, a facility's reopening phase will be based on the status of COVID-19 in the surrounding community and at the facility, as well as the availability of certain resources to protect residents and staff from exposure during visits, such as face masks, gloves and gowns. Our facilities continue to work diligently to secure the resources needed, but the supply chain nationwide remains strained while demand has increased a thousand-fold for certain products.

Depending on these and other factors, a facility will be operating under one of three phases of reopening. If any of these factors change over time, a nursing facility may be required to return to a more restrictive phase.

Facilities will notify families when they progress from one phase to the next. Generally speaking, the following types of visits are allowed per phase:

- **Phase One:** Compassionate care, such as end-of-life visits, window visits, virtual visits and limited outdoor visits.
- **Phase Two:** Adds visitation options for residents nearing end of life or experiencing significant changes in condition.

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- **Phase Three:** Adds limited in-person visits that comply with each facility's specific visitation policies, which may include additional screening procedures, scheduling visits and the use of personal protective equipment while visiting.

When your facility reaches Phase Three, allowing in person visitation, expect to follow new safety measures requested by the facility, such as scheduling your visit, going through health screening protocols when on site and wearing a mask when you visit. Each facility will designate visitor safety protocols to protect you and their residents.

The sacrifices Iowa's long-term care residents and their families have been forced to make to keep their loved ones safe in the wake of this devastating virus are anguishing. I have heard from families desperate to see their loved one, and I have seen the distress on the faces of policymakers as they've drawn up necessary but heartbreaking visitation limitation requirements to keep residents safe. There is no question these policies have saved lives and has allowed us to now turn to the eventual safe reunification of Iowa families and their loved ones.

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