

Department of Aging Joins AARP to Support Family Connections in Long-Term Care Facilities

Harrisburg, PA – The Pennsylvania Department of Aging’s Office of Long-Term Care Ombudsman announced it is partnering with AARP Pennsylvania to offer communication devices to long-term care facilities that will help residents increase contact with their family and friends.

With support from the Pennsylvania Association of Area Agencies on Aging, this pilot program will provide cell phones and tablets to 46 skilled nursing facilities in 40 counties where resident advocates known as Pennsylvania Empowered Expert Residents (PEERs) or a facility’s staff member had expressed a need for phones/tablets and have made a commitment to support the appropriate use of the devices. Nineteen devices will go to facilities identified as Special Focus Facilities by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) and/or are operating under provisional licenses.

“As restrictions from the COVID-19 emergency continue, concerned family members want to maintain contact and stay connected with their loved ones in long-term care facilities. To support facilities having limited options or challenges in helping residents to stay in touch, the Department of Aging is pleased to partner with AARP to provide this technology to help residents stay engaged and hopefully avoid feelings of depression and social isolation,” said Aging Secretary Robert Torres.

The Department and AARP will distribute the activated devices to the targeted facilities utilizing PEERs, resident councils and other resident leaders and nursing home activities directors to implement this project.

“The COVID-19 pandemic has forced visitation bans at long-term care facilities across Pennsylvania, effectively isolating residents from friends and family,” said Bill Johnston-Walsh, AARP Pennsylvania state director. “AARP is very pleased to be working with the Department of Aging to make cell phones and other technology available to help vulnerable older adults maintain critical lines of communication during this crisis.”

Two organizations that advocate for older Pennsylvanians say they are in full support of this partnership’s pilot program.

“We believe this is an excellent initiative that will help residents connect with family at a time when it is unsafe to visit,” said Anne Henry, senior vice president and chief government affairs officer of LeadingAge PA. “We appreciate the leadership of the PA Department of Aging and AARP and look forward to working with them to implement this important program.”

“For the past several months, the caregivers in Pennsylvania’s nursing homes, assisted living communities and personal care homes have gone to extraordinary lengths to ensure the health and wellbeing of the residents entrusted to their care,” said Zach Shamberg, president and CEO of the Pennsylvania Health Care Association. “While a number of providers have already taken steps to offer alternative means of communication to keep their residents connected to family and friends, we’re thrilled this partnership will expand these opportunities to more facilities and communities across the commonwealth.”

With 73 local ombudsmen in communities across Pennsylvania, the Office of the Long-Term

Care Ombudsman advocates and empowers long-term care residents to resolve complaints and issues on a case-by-case basis. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the program has served as a source of encouragement and connection for families that are trying to reach loved ones in long-term care facilities despite challenges in doing so.

“The Office of Long-Term Care Ombudsman remains committed to assisting residents in facilities and their families with staying in touch through this pandemic. We understand the frustration and heartbreak families are facing, and we want to ensure they are aware of how their loved ones are doing and that they are safe,” said Margaret Barajas, state long-term care ombudsman. “This partnership with AARP is a great opportunity to get communication devices into long-term care facilities to give families and their loved ones some peace of mind.”

Volunteers that support the Office of Long-Term Care Ombudsman recently launched a new resource called the Virtual Family Council, which offers families a chance to virtually connect with a local ombudsman and other experts to ask questions and discuss protocols, rights and procedures for their loved ones in long-term care facilities. The meetings are held weekly and do not address specific issues regarding a resident or a facility. Anyone interested in joining the meetings can email jarotz@pa.gov and indicate “Virtual Family Council” in the subject line. They will receive an automatic email reply with instructions on how to connect and the link for the meetings.