The New York State Department of Health and State Office for the Aging Announce Plan to Improve Support Services for Long Term Care Residents and their Families

Department of Health to Provide $1 Million In Fundingfor the Purchase of Communication Technology and Accessories to Connect Residents to Family Members and the Long Term Care Ombudsman Program

State to Promote Awareness Campaign to Improve Access to LTCOP and Expand Volunteer Ombudsman Recruitment Strategies

"Reimagine" State Agency Partnership Formed to Recommend Best Practices for Ombudsmen to Connect with Families, Engage Volunteers, Increase Information Sharing and Expand Services

ALBANY, N.Y. (July 17, 2020) - The New York State Department of Health and State Office for the Aging today announced afive-point plan to help long term care residents and their families access services through the Office of the State Long Term Care Ombudsman Program, provide additional resources to residents and families appealing involuntary discharges,expand the ombudsman volunteer program, "reimagine" a multi-agency workgroup to enhance services, and provide up to $1 million in funding for long term care facilities to purchase tablets, webcams, headphones, or other accessories to help residents stay connected with family and LTCOP during the COVID-19 crisis and beyond.

New York State Commissioner of Health Dr. Howard Zucker said, "When our loved ones reside in a nursing home, regular communication concerning their care is vital to the advocacy of residents and the peace of mind for their family members. Governor Cuomo's plan, which includes $1 million in funding from the State Department of Health to purchase communications technology to help increase access tothe Long Term Care Ombudsman Program, gives residents and their families a voice and will continue to serve communities during the COVID-19 pandemic response and beyond."

New York State Office for the Aging Acting Director Greg Olsen said, "The Long Term Care Ombudsman Program has not gone away through this pandemic; it has shifted its work to remote and technology based advocacy. Families and friends of residential facility residents can and should reach out to LTCOP staff and volunteers if they have any quality of care concerns with their loved ones. We will continue to work with the Department of Health, resident councils, and facilities to ensure the safety and security of all residents."

The New York State Department of Health and Office for the Aging are partnering to encourage nursing home residents and their families to access the services available through the Office of the State Long Term Care Ombudsman.

New York's successful Long Term Care Ombudsman Program is a vital resource for adult care facility and nursing home residents and their families.The innovative agency partnership will advance thisfive-point plan to

improve residents' access to LTCOP's services and improve resident communication with family and friends:

1. Provide up to $1 million for nursing homes to purchase technology tools to enhance resident communication options and help reduce social isolation.

The Department of Health will provide up to $1 million in funding for nursing homes to purchase tablets, webcams, headphones, or other accessories to help residents stay connected with family and the LTCOP during the COVID-19 crisis and beyond. This targeted use of federal Civil Monetary Penalty (CMP) funds is expected to assist residents of nursing homes with social isolation as facilities are currently required to restrict visitor access. Nursing homes will be encouraged to submit an application toDOH to receive up to $3,000 through the CMP fund for the purchase of communicative technology and accessories needed to connect residents to family and to the LTCOP.

2. Publicize LTCOP's availability to residents and their families.

During the COVID-19 response, the State Ombudsman sent letters reminding long term care facilities and the families they serve of the ongoing requirement to allow residents and families continued access to their ombudsman through various methods of communications including telephone calls and video conferencing.

To encourage continued access, especially during a potential COVID-19 second wave, NYSOFA and DOH will promote LTCOP's resources through social media and news outlets around the state, and will continue to remind facilities of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services requirement to provide access to LTCOPfor residents and families.

3. Provide additional resources for residents and families appealing involuntary discharges.

Require nursing homes to provide a listing of free legal advocacy options, facility ombudsman contact information, and additional information on resident rights consistent with adult care facilities, upon serving a notice of involuntary discharge. NYSOFA and NYSDOH will work with stakeholders to develop best practices for avoiding involuntary discharges.

4. Expand LTCOP volunteer recruitment strategies.

There is an urgent need for LTCOP volunteers, regardless of age. This program offers a challenging and rewarding volunteer opportunity that offers flexible hours—and is an important way to contribute to one's community by assisting some of its most vulnerable members. State agency partners will:

- Provide information to all state employees regarding becoming a volunteer ombudsman. In addition, a campaign will be initiated to attract new state retirees.
- Work with the Office of National and Community Service to have LTCOP listed on their web portal as a volunteer option.
- Coordinate outreach to AARP and other stakeholders about development of a volunteer recruitment campaign. LTCOP offers retirees and other interested volunteers of all ages an excellent opportunity for those seeking a meaningful and rewarding way to use their skills to help others in their community.

5. "Reimagine" the program workgroup chaired by NYSOFA, DOH, and AARP.

The "Reimagine" workgroup will provide recommendations to enhance the ability of LTCOP and DOH to assist residents and their families. The goals of the workgroup will focus on:

- Developing a cohesive statewide training for certifying new ombudsman, including development of a standardized web-based training to allow for more flexibility and increase the volunteer pool.
- Increasing collaboration and information sharing between LTCOP and DOH to address issues raised by residents and their families that are not resolvable by LTCOP.

- Developing clear guidance for residents and families regarding when to contact an ombudsman and when to file a complaint with the Department of Health.
- Engaging with schools of social work and schools of nursing to develop opportunities for students to obtain credits for becoming a certified ombudsman.
- Exploring strategies to best harness the power of volunteers, as well as research alternative models to expand the program.

New York State Ombudsman Claudette Royal said, "Throughout this pandemic, our 15 regional programs have remained engaged with residents, families, and facilities to provide information and support to ensure that resident rights are protected. We look forward to working with our partners to strengthen and enhance critical advocacy services for long term care residents across the state."

State Director of AARP New York Beth Finkel said, "Fighting social isolation in New York's nursing homes as the state's technology investment will help do is critical to the health of residents. Strengthening the Long Term Care Ombudsman Program by expanding the pool of volunteers to younger New Yorkers, among other things, should help ensure quality care to residents. And helping residents and their families know their rights and access free legal advocacy should help reduce involuntary discharges. AARP has been advocating for the rights of residents in nursing homes and other residential care facilities since our founding over 60 years ago. We commend the state for taking these steps."

The Long Term Care Ombudsman Program is an effective advocate and resource for older adults and people with disabilities who live in nursing homes, assisted living, and other licensed adult care homes. LTCOP services are made available through a contingent of 15 regional program sponsors which host the program's staff and a volunteer corps of over 400 people who have completed a 36-hour certification training obtaining skills to investigate and resolve complaints through effective communication, observation, and mediation skills. All volunteers are required to shadow an experienced certified ombudsman before being assigned to a facility. Once assigned to a facility, they are required to spend at least four hours a week visiting residents, listening to their concerns, and troubleshooting problems with the facility administration.

For more information on theLong Term Care Ombudsman Program, please visit https://aging.ny.gov/long-term-care-ombudsman-program.