State Updates Guidelines for Enhanced Long Term Care Visitation

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Nearly a year after Oklahoma first closed visitation at long-term care facilities, Governor Kevin Stitt and Health Commissioner Lance Frye announced today the state is updating its visitation guidelines to allow visitors who have completed state-certified essential care training to visit their loved one.

Oklahoma closed visitation to long-term care facilities in mid-March 2020 to protect Oklahomans who were most at risk of serious illness from COVID-19. This decision was made earlier than most other states.

Since then, Oklahoma has been a leader in COVID-19 vaccine distribution, with per capita vaccine distribution rates regularly in the top 10 in the nation. Thanks to ongoing mitigation and vaccine rollout efforts in Oklahoma and across the nation, the Kaiser Family Foundation reports that as of Feb. 14, weekly new deaths among nursing home residents have decreased 83% since vaccination efforts began in December.

“At the onset of the pandemic, we reviewed the emerging data on COVID-19, and we knew elderly Oklahomans and those with comorbidities were at high risk in our long-term care centers. I firmly believe that our decision to close these facilities to visitors early saved lives,” said Gov. Stitt. “Isolation and depression are a very real threat for Oklahomans who have been separated from their loved ones by COVID-19. Now, with vaccinations being carried out at long

term care centers across the state and case levels on the decline, we believe families can now safely see their loved ones."

The updated guidelines state that long-term care and assisted living centers may allow each resident to designate one or more essential caregivers who may make in-person visits. These visitors must complete state training to become essential caregivers, which will be made available online and should not take more than 15 minutes to complete. All long term care centers are encouraged to follow this new guidance.

"This new guidance is life-altering for Oklahomans living in long-term care centers and their family members who have been separated for so long," said Deputy Commissioner of Health Innovation Travis Kirkpatrick. "This significant change will ensure the safety of residents, staff and family members and continues our ongoing efforts to adjust our state guidance based on the realities on the ground here in Oklahoma. We urge all long term care centers to follow these new guidelines."

Visitors who complete the training will still need to follow a number of guidelines in order to safely visit their loved ones:

- If both the resident and visitor are vaccinated:
  - A mask is required and proof of vaccination completion must be provided for both to have non-supervised contact.

- If either the resident or visitor is not vaccinated:
  - A mask is required and proof of a negative COVID-19 test or onsite test may be required for both to have non-supervised contact.

- If neither the resident nor visitor are vaccinated:
  - A mask is required and proof of a negative COVID-19 test or onsite test may be required for both to have a supervised, no-contact visit.

Facilities must also continue to follow other procedures to prevent infection from COVID-19. In addition to this new state guidance, OSDH is also providing long term care facilities with the necessary PPE to keep both residents and visitors safe and access to rapid COVID-19 tests to give a holistic approach to prevention.

"I do want to remind Oklahomans that despite recent updated guidance from the CDC for those who have been vaccinated, if you're visiting a long term care center it's still important to follow the masking guidelines outlined above out of an abundance of caution," said State Commissioner of Health Dr. Lance Frye. "This is for the safety of your loved one and everyone in the building who may be vulnerable to COVID-19. We are excited this will give families the opportunity to reunite with their loved ones in a safe way."

Last Modified on Aug 13, 2021