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Statement from AARP North Dakota Concerning COVID-19 and Long-Term Care Facilities

Gov. Doug Burgum has raised the possibility of soon reinstating visitation in nursing homes and other long-term care facilities – home to more than 5,300 of the state’s most vulnerable individuals. As the state determines when and how best to once again allow in-person visitation, AARP North Dakota is urging careful adherence to CMS guidelines to ensure that the health and well-being of residents, staff, visitors, and those in the surrounding communities are protected.

In the meantime, AARP North Dakota urgently repeats its call for virtual visitation and transparency. We ask that the state require all long-term care (LTC) facilities to proactively work to connect residents with their loved ones virtually. North Dakotans living in LTC facilities want to communicate with their families and families are anxious to know what is happening to their loved ones. All LTC facilities should be required to offer *and facilitate* these virtual visits. The state has even been given a grant to facilitate virtual visitation, so there is no reason residents and loved ones should be without virtual visitation. In fact, it should be happening in every nursing home and it’s long overdue.

In addition to virtual visitation, AARP North Dakota strongly reiterates our call for increased transparency. Given that the majority of all deaths in North Dakota from COVID-19 have occurred in nursing homes, that there continues to be increasing numbers of LTC facilities reporting cases of COVID-19, including in rural areas, and that the number of confirmed total cases in these facilities (now 478 cases in 63 facilities) continues to grow every day, residents, staff, families and the public deserve to know in which facilities cases have occurred. This transparency is critical for public health and the well-being of residents, staff and the public for their own health decisions and as they consider possible next steps and interventions for their loved ones.

In addition to this critical information, the state should be transparent about the steps all LTC facilities are taking to prevent employees and vendors from bringing the virus into the facility.

For those with a spouse, sibling, parent, or other loved one in a nursing home, AARP recommends asking the facility the following key questions to help keep them safe, remain connected, and stay informed:

1. Has anyone in the nursing home tested positive for COVID-19? This includes residents as well as staff or other vendors who may have been in the nursing home.
2. What is the nursing home doing to prevent infections? How are nursing home staff being screened for COVID-19? What precautions are in place for residents who are not in private rooms?
3. Does nursing home staff have the personal protective equipment and training they need to stay safe and keep their patients safe? If not, what is the plan to obtain personal protective equipment?
4. What is the nursing home doing to help residents stay connected with their families or other loved ones during this time? Will the nursing home set up a regular schedule for you to speak with your loved one by phone or video call?
5. What is the plan for the nursing home to communicate important information to both residents and families on a regular basis? Will the nursing home be contacting you by phone or email, and when?
6. Is the nursing home currently at full staffing levels for nurses, aides, and other workers? What is the plan to make sure the needs of nursing home residents are met if the nursing home has staffing shortages?

For more information on AARP North Dakota's advocacy work on behalf of long-term care residents and their families, go to aarp.org/nd.

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With 85,000 members in North Dakota, AARP is the nation's largest nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to empowering Americans 50 and older to choose how they live as they age. With nearly 38 million members and offices in every state, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands, AARP works to strengthen communities and advocate for what matters most to families with a focus on health security, financial stability and personal fulfillment. AARP also works for individuals in the marketplace by sparking new solutions and allowing carefully chosen, high-quality products and services to carry the AARP name. As a trusted source for news and information, AARP produces the nation's largest circulation publications, AARP The Magazine and AARP Bulletin. To learn more, visit www.aarp.org or follow @AARP and @AARPadvocates on social media.