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COVID-19 cases in Iowa long-term care facilities on the decline as spread slows and vaccination uptake rises

“Very promising signs,” says Iowa Health Care Association President & CEO

For those who have been longing to visit a loved one in a nursing home, there is encouraging news this week as new data shows that county positivity rates and COVID-19 cases in long-term care facilities are on the decline. This is important because nursing home visitation rules are based on county COVID-19 positivity rates.

Nursing homes are required to strictly follow regulations governing visitation issued by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS). Given the strong correlation between community spread and outbreaks in long-term care facilities, current CMS visitation regulations pin varying tiers of visitation permissions to the level of COVID-19 positivity within a county. Once a county’s positivity rate falls to less than 10%, nursing homes may be allowed to offer additional indoor visits. Each nursing home must develop its own visitation policy and set of safety protocols which consider the health and safety of all residents and staff. Additionally, a nursing home must not be in “CMS outbreak status,” meaning they may not have any COVID-19 cases in the facility.

While limited visitation may be allowed dependent upon county positivity rates under current CMS regulations, the agency has indicated it will need more empirical data prior to making any changes to current visitation restrictions. Providers are required to abide by CMS visitation regulations even if residents and staff have been vaccinated.

In the latter half of January, 54 of Iowa’s 99 counties had a positivity rate below 10%, a major improvement over the 34 counties below 10% in the first half of January and the 28 counties which met the criteria in last half of December.

New data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) shows a significant decline in COVID-19 activity at Iowa long-term care facilities for the same period:

- Cases at Iowa facilities are down 70% in the past month, from 410 at the end of December to 119 by mid-January. Iowa is outperforming the nation, where cases are down only 37% over the past month.
- Outbreaks in Iowa are down by 70% in the past month, to 43 facilities compared to 146 in December.
- Deaths at Iowa facilities are down 34% in the past month, from 81 at the end of December to 53 by mid-January. Nationwide deaths at long-term care facilities declined only 21% over the past month.

This news comes as Iowa long-term care facilities are well on their way to completing the federal Long-Term Care vaccination program.

- Iowa is on track to be among the first states to have vaccinated each of its long-term care facilities, with 100% of Iowa’s 445 skilled nursing and 258 assisted living facilities having administered their first dose and more than 50% having administered their second dose.

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- Iowa has among the highest uptake of vaccine by residents and staff in the nation, with staff numbers climbing further on second clinics. Nationwide 77.8% of long-term care residents and 37.5% of staff had received their first dose of the vaccine by the end of January. In Iowa, where 82,000 vaccine doses had been administered to long-term care residents and staff through February 4, the Iowa Health Care Association (IHCA) estimates that approximately 60% of staff elected to receive the vaccine during the first clinic offering, with another 25% of staff elected to receive it during the second clinic. IHCA estimates that 90% of LTC residents have elected to receive the vaccine.
- The substantial vaccine uptake among staff and residents in Iowa is further notable since Iowa is vaccinating residents and staff of nursing homes and assisted living facilities as part of its priority tier. Many states did not include assisted living in the priority tier.

“Iowa long-term care residents, families, and staff members are doing their part to protect themselves and their communities,” said Brent Willett, president and CEO of the IHCA, adding “We have asked our residents and staff to be the first people in the world to take this vaccine, and they’ve courageously stepped up. We are far from declaring victory against COVID, but we are seeing very promising signs thanks in no small part to them.”

About the Iowa Health Care Association

The Iowa Health Care Association (IHCA), along with its affiliates the Iowa Center for Assisted Living (ICAL) and Iowa Center for Home Care (ICHC), is an integrated statewide association serving organizations that provide post-acute health care to improve the lives of Iowans, including nursing facilities, assisted living, residential care, senior living communities and home health agencies.

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