



January 20, 2022

Assisted Living Visitation

The California Association of Long-Term Care Medicine's Assisted Living (AL) Delphi Group has been convening since the fall of 2020. Composed of national experts in geriatrics and long-term care medicine as well as subject matter experts with specific interest in AL, the Group has collaborated with state and national AL organizations to promote education and best practices in the AL industry.

At the onset of the pandemic the need to protect vulnerable AL residents from the virus was paramount in decisions to halt visitation. Over time, the negative impact of social isolation has become painfully clear. The AL Delphi group promotes the use of appropriate infection prevention and control measures, particularly in high-risk individuals and situations. In addition to this we also must consider the evidence-based literature that strongly suggests that social isolation causes direct harm to residents. There are also many advantages, including physical, emotional and psychosocial, in allowing family members and loved ones to visit in AL communities.

We believe that vaccinated, boosted visitors seeing vaccinated, boosted residents who are cared for by vaccinated, boosted staff is the ideal situation. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) vaccination mandates specifically exclude AL (although there are some state-specific requirements). The AL Delphi Group supports resident and staff vaccinations and booster shots based on clinical evidence of vaccine effectiveness in preventing serious COVID 19 infections.

We believe that AL organizations have a duty to protect their residents. We support encouraging vaccination and boosters while recognizing that vaccination mandates could exacerbate existing staff shortages. Screening and testing strategies for AL residents, staff and visitors should focus on safety for unvaccinated and high-risk individuals. Staff should not be put in the position of having to individually monitor visitors according to their vaccination status; instead, they should be supported by strong facility policy. Testing supplies should be prioritized to the AL setting in part not to impede visitation.

Accommodations should be made for unvaccinated visitors and unvaccinated residents while also minimizing risk of asymptomatic spread of COVID to others. This includes options such as outdoor visits, visits in designated areas, virtual visits and use of N95 masks. Staff need clear guidance for identification of and protocols for high risk situations (any visit from an unvaccinated visitor, symptomatic visitors, visitors with recent COVID exposures, visits from a group that does not live together, visitors without a negative COVID test taken in the past 24 hours, residents leaving the community and then returning).

Summary and Recommendations:

- 1) The risk to AL residents of social isolation is substantial and has been well documented. The AL Delphi Group recommends that state AL guidance and regulations explicitly require facilities to return resident visitation rights for vaccinated visitors to visit vaccinated residents as they could prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The absence of available test kits or test results, or the staff to perform the test, should not impede vaccinated, boosted residents' rights to visitation with vaccinated, boosted visitors.
- 2) With existing staffing shortages that may worsen, there is a need for families to be able to visit loved ones. This is of critical importance for the well-being of both residents and their loved ones.
- 3) It is appropriate for AL communities to encourage all visitors and staff to be vaccinated/boosted and to strongly promote appropriate infection prevention measures such as proper use of N95 masks for visitors and staff alike.
- 4) AL communities are responsible for following best practices and state-specific regulations to keep residents and staff safe. Appropriate screening should be performed especially during periods with high community prevalence, and proper accommodations should be made for unvaccinated visitors.
- 5) Testing strategies in AL for both staff and visitors should focus on safety for unvaccinated and high-risk individuals and for high-risk situations. Staff need clear guidance and ample supplies provided for appropriate testing, particularly during periods of high community COVID prevalence, which follows established best practices.