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October 4, 2016

Department of Health Releases Nursing Home Quality Improvement Task Force Report; Outlines Significant Improvements to Oversight of Pennsylvania's Facilities

Attorney General provides \$1.2 million to facilitate changes

Harrisburg, PA – Pennsylvania Department of Health Secretary Dr. Karen Murphy today released the recommendations of the Nursing Home Quality Improvement Task Force. The task force was created as part of the department's proactive efforts under the Wolf Administration to make the most significant changes to nursing home oversight in nearly two decades.

Secretary Murphy also announced the Office of Attorney General is providing \$1.2 million to help facilitate the recommended changes.

“Since coming into office, the Wolf Administration has made several significant changes to the Department of Health's nursing home care oversight to ensure we are doing our utmost to protect residents,” said Secretary Murphy. “The task force helped us look at how we, as regulators, can improve our interaction with nursing homes, as well as the revisions that need to be made to the regulations themselves to improve the quality of life for all residents. I want to emphasize that today's announcement is in no way an indictment of the entire nursing home industry in Pennsylvania – we have many excellent facilities. But we will continue to make improvements to ensure that every Pennsylvanian living in a nursing home has access to high-quality care.”

The task force confirmed a misalignment between outdated nursing home care regulations and the type of care that is needed in today's nursing homes. It concluded that in the past, state regulations were designed to evaluate the quality of the actual nursing home facility, but did not fully account for the quality of life of the residents themselves.

“Another important distinction to note is that a generation ago, a nursing home was a place to live out your final days,” Secretary Murphy added. “Today, in addition to providing long-term care, nursing homes have become a place for

short-term stays for the elderly following surgery or a prolonged hospital stay. We need to revise regulations to meet the needs of all nursing home residents.”

This philosophical shift in regulations will change how nursing homes function and improve the quality of life for all residents. The task force identified the following key areas to focus efforts:

- Improve collaboration between policy makers, lawmakers, providers, health care professionals, and most importantly, the residents of nursing homes and their advocates;
- Change regulations and expand facility inspections to focus on the quality of life for residents who live in that facility;
- Perform more comprehensive and consistent surveys to collect data that allows for consistent evaluation of quality of life in nursing homes; and
- Redesign workforce composition and competencies.

The Department of Health plans to use the \$1.2 million from the Office of Attorney General to execute a performance improvement plan to enhance the regulatory oversight of nursing homes in Pennsylvania.

In the coming months, the department will work with legislators, revise its regulations, recommend laws, and retrain Department of Health staff to make a fundamental shift in nursing home oversight.

In 2015, Secretary Murphy asked Auditor General Eugene DePasquale to take a critical look at how the state responds to nursing home complaints. His report highlighted three key areas where improvement was needed:

- Consistency when evaluating nursing homes' compliance with current staffing requirements;
- Procedures implemented to respond to all complaints; and
- Effective methods to fine facilities that are out of compliance.

Since the beginning of the Wolf Administration, the department has:

- Established new procedures to ensure surveys are more objective and consistent from facility to facility.
- Improved communication to anyone who files a complaint to give them more complete details of the investigation.
- Reinstated anonymous reporting in July 2015 to ensure residents and advocates feel free to make a complaint. Since that time, nursing home complaints have increased overall by 155 percent.
- Made it easier for individuals to make complaints. The online complaint form was made more visible and accessible. The process to make verbal

complaints was also improved with the installation of a new telephone system that increased caller access to a person rather than a voicemail.

- Increased enforcement of regulatory sanctions and revised its calculations for how facilities are fined. Fines will be based not only on the deficiencies, but will also take into consideration:
 - The level of harm;
 - How long it will take a facility to correct the deficiency and prevent it from happening again;
 - The degree to which the potential harm can impact other residents; and
 - The facility's track record with regulatory compliance.
- Launched a new campaign "Speak up. We are listening," to let Pennsylvanians know they have a safe place to raise their concerns. Posters will be mailed next week to all of the state's nursing homes, which will be required to prominently display them in their facilities.
- Redesigned the nursing home portion of its website to make it easier for individuals to find important information. This new webpage will include monthly reports of nursing home survey results and sanctions. For more information, visit www.nursinghomes.health.pa.gov.

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