NURSING HOMES

Improved Oversight Needed to Better Protect Residents from Abuse

Why GAO Did This Study

Nursing homes provide care to about 1.4 million nursing home residents—a vulnerable population of elderly and disabled individuals. CMS, an agency within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), defines standards nursing homes must meet to participate in the Medicare and Medicaid programs.

GAO was asked to review abuse of residents in nursing homes. Among other objectives, this report: (1) determines the trends and types of abuse in recent years, and (2) evaluates CMS oversight intended to ensure residents are free from abuse.

What GAO Found

The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) is responsible for ensuring nursing homes meet federal quality standards, including that residents are free from abuse. CMS enters into agreements with state survey agencies to conduct surveys of the state’s homes and to investigate complaints and incidents. GAO analysis of CMS data found that, while relatively rare, abuse deficiencies cited in nursing homes more than doubled, increasing from 430 in 2013 to 875 in 2017, with the largest increase in severe cases. GAO also reviewed a representative sample of abuse deficiency narratives from 2016 through 2017. Physical and mental/verbal abuse occurred most often in nursing homes, followed by sexual abuse, and staff were more often the perpetrators of the abuse deficiencies cited. CMS cannot readily access information on abuse or perpetrator type in its data and, therefore, lacks key information critical to taking appropriate actions.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making six recommendations, including that CMS: require state survey agencies to submit data on abuse and perpetrator type; require state survey agencies to immediately refer to law enforcement any suspicion of a crime; and develop guidance on what abuse information nursing homes should self-report. HHS concurred with all of GAO’s recommendations and identified actions it will take to implement them.

View GAO-19-433. For more information, contact John Dicken at (202) 512-7114 or dickenj@gao.gov.