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HEALTH CARE CAPSULE

IMPROVING NURSING HOME QUALITY AND INFORMATION

Nursing homes provide long-term residential and short-term rehabilitative care for vulnerable populations. This capsule summarizes past GAO reports on concerns about nursing home quality of care, consumer information, and COVID-19, and federal efforts to address these concerns.

Over 1.4 million Americans, including veterans, receive care in about 15,500 nursing homes. Most of these homes are overseen by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS), while homes that serve veterans are overseen by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Some homes are overseen by both.

CMS defines the quality standards the homes it oversees must meet in order to participate in Medicare and Medicaid. CMS-certified nursing homes are regularly inspected, and if a home violates a federal standard, a deficiency is cited and must be corrected. VA generally follows a similar oversight process for the homes it oversees—its community living centers and state-owned and -operated veterans homes. Both CMS and VA provide some nursing home quality information to consumers through their websites.

NURSING HOME QUALITY OF CARE: BEFORE AND DURING COVID-19

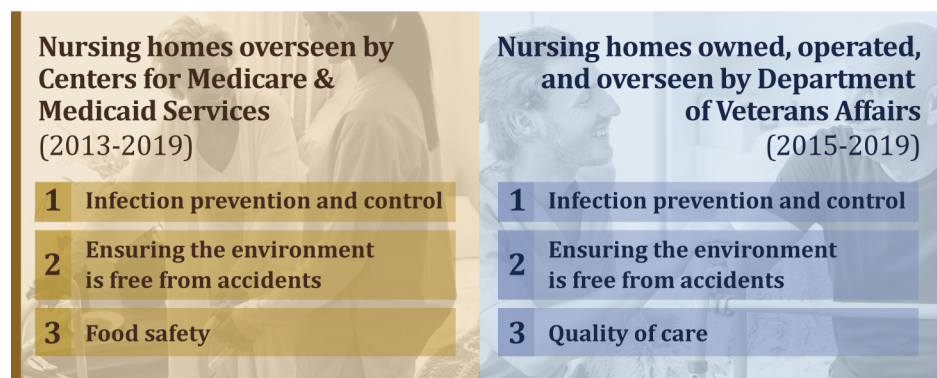
The COVID-19 pandemic has brought into sharper focus problems with nursing home quality that GAO has reported on—and made recommendations to address—for many years, and some of these recommendations have yet to be implemented. Specifically, GAO has

identified gaps in CMS's oversight that made it harder to protect nursing home residents from abuse and concerns about VA's oversight of the nursing home inspection process it uses to ensure quality of care. In addition, in the years prior to the pandemic, infection prevention and control deficiencies, such as failure to use proper hand hygiene, were the most common type of deficiency cited by surveyors in nursing homes. (See [fig. 1](#)) Many of the same nursing homes were repeatedly cited for these infection prevention and control deficiencies year after year, indicating persistent quality of care problems.

Nursing homes have experienced a disproportionately high number of COVID-19 deaths when compared to the general U.S. population. Efforts to reduce the spread of COVID-19

in nursing homes led to changes in infection prevention and control practices, including restricting loved ones and friends from visiting during critical points in the pandemic to prevent transmission. The resulting isolation raised concerns about unintended harm to residents, since isolation can increase loneliness, anxiety, and depression. Additionally, resident advocates, such as ombudsmen, were restricted from entering, limiting oversight of facilities during the pandemic. Nursing home visitation was allowed again for all residents beginning in November 2021, and public health officials emphasize the need for nursing homes to remain vigilant in maintaining proper infection prevention and control practices while balancing the psychosocial health needs of residents.

Figure 1: Top 3 Nursing Home Deficiencies Cited by CMS and VA



Source: GAO analysis; Pixel-Shot, weavebreak3/stock.adobe.com (photos). | GAO-22-105422

NURSING HOME INFORMATION FOR CONSUMERS

Providing consumers with information on the quality of nursing home care can help them make informed decisions for their loved ones. CMS’s Care Compare website allows the public to research and compare nursing homes using a rating system. Similarly, as part of its efforts to help veterans find nursing homes, VA provides public information on quality for the nursing homes it owns and operates and its privately contracted nursing homes on VA’s Access to Care website.

These websites are valuable tools for helping consumers make informed care decisions. However, GAO has found that some information on the quality of nursing homes is incomplete and has made several recommendations to try to improve the information that is available. CMS and VA are taking steps to address some of these recommendations (see table 1).

POLICY QUESTIONS

- Nursing home quality concerns that have existed for several years have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. How can federal agencies like CMS and VA best focus their efforts to improve oversight of quality of care in nursing homes during the pandemic and in the future?
- Complete information on quality is important for consumers to make informed decisions about nursing home care. In what ways can CMS and VA continue to improve the information provided on their websites?

GAO’s future work will continue to address issues such as these.

Table 1: Examples of Incomplete Information Provided on CMS and VA Consumer Websites

Examples of incomplete information	What has GAO recommended and what, if anything, has the federal agency done?
Key information that indicates if a nursing home is high- or low-performing	CMS should add information to Care Compare that allows nursing homes to be compared nationally, rather than only within a state. In addition, CMS should add more information on staffing, such as weekend decreases in nurse staffing levels and minimum nurse staffing thresholds needed to ensure quality of care. As of December 2021, CMS had not implemented these recommendations. For more information, see GAO-17-61 and GAO-21-408.
Information on incidents of abuse	CMS should disclose to consumers that the Care Compare website has incomplete information on abuse in Oregon nursing homes. In 2019, CMS added a Consumer Alert to the Care Compare website. For more information, see GAO-19-313R. In addition, after GAO found gaps in CMS’s oversight of abuse, CMS added an abuse icon to the Care Compare website so that consumers could more easily identify homes cited with abuse deficiencies. For more information, see GAO-19-433.
COVID-19 vaccination rates among residents and staff	The Department of Health and Human Services should ensure that data specific to the COVID-19 vaccination rates be made publicly available. As of June 2021, CMS has posted resident and staff vaccination rates for over 15,000 nursing homes on a public COVID-19 Nursing Home Data tracking website. Further, in September 2021, resident and staff vaccination rates were made available in a more consumer-friendly manner on the Care Compare website. For more information, see GAO-21-387.
Information on the quality of state veterans homes—state-owned and -operated nursing homes for veterans	VA should provide information on the quality of all state veterans homes that is comparable to the information provided on the other type of nursing home facilities on its Access to Care website. VA added information from CMS on the homes that are inspected by CMS, and in July 2021 VA said it planned additional improvements that would take time. As of December 2021, this recommendation has not been fully implemented. For more information, see GAO-19-428.

Source: GAO. | GAO-22-105422

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