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Advocates Welcome Changes to National Nursing Home Rating System: Call for Federal Government to Do More to Improve System and Care

Washington, DC, February 20, 2015– The National Consumer Voice for Quality Long-Term Care (Consumer Voice) and the Long Term Care Community Coalition (LTCCC) commend CMS for improvements it is making to the Nursing Home Compare Five Star Rating System and urge the agency to continue to implement additional changes needed to enhance this resource and to use its authority to improve the quality of nursing home care in the United States.

Consumer Voice, LTCCC and other advocacy organizations have long been concerned that inaccuracies of the Five-Star Rating System mislead consumers who are making critical decisions about which nursing home to choose for their own care or for a loved one. Data about staffing levels, a critical factor affecting the quality of care provided to nursing home residents, and quality measure “stars” are both currently self-reported by nursing homes and have been unaudited. CMS itself has acknowledged that the staffing data are unreliable and has been concerned about the accuracy of the information used to calculate quality measures.

On February 11th, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) announced revisions to several components of the rating system. These changes include: 1) adding two new quality measures that report the use of antipsychotic medications to the five-star calculations – one for long stay residents, the other for short stay residents; 2) raising the bar for performance on quality measures by increasing the number of total quality measure points needed to achieve each star rating; 3) conducting specialized onsite surveys of a sample of facilities nationwide to assess accuracy of the resident assessment information used to calculate quality measures; and 4) adjusting how the number of stars awarded for staffing is determined.

According to Robyn Grant, Director of Public Policy and Advocacy at Consumer Voice, advocates believe these revisions, though overdue, are a step in the right direction. “We think that rescaling the quality measures will result in improved reporting of the quality of care a nursing home may provide, and while we remain very concerned about the fact that the data are self-reported, we are glad to see that CMS will begin to evaluate independently the accuracy of resident assessment data used in calculating the quality measure ratings. We are also very pleased to see that two quality measures for antipsychotic use will be included in the five star system. Antipsychotics can have devastating effects on nursing home residents and are often used as a substitute for good care.”

In addition, Grant noted that while the change to the staffing star rating is important, the real change needed is implementation of objective reporting based on payroll data. CMS was to have operationalized an electronic reporting system to collect this information by March 2012, and Consumer Voice and LTCCC, along with other advocates, have pushed the agency to do so for over two years. CMS now states the system will be in place by the end of 2016.

Consumer Voice and LTCCC acknowledge the effort CMS is putting into the staffing and quality measure components of the five star system but call on the agency to also address issues relating to the third component of the five star system –

health inspections. For years, residents and their families, long-term care ombudsmen, and citizen advocates have noted care problems that are not identified or recorded during the survey or complaint investigation process. The failure of the inspections to identify serious care problems and adequately assess harm to residents, combined with weak, ineffective enforcement of nursing home non-compliance, result in inflated star ratings, misleading information for consumers and chronic substandard care for residents.

Selecting the best nursing home for yourself or a loved one is one of the most important decisions any of us will ever make. Increasingly, the public looks to Nursing Home Compare and the Five Star Rating system as a primary resource for information about the quality of care provided by nursing homes. Consequently, every day consumers and family members are unknowingly using flawed or incomplete data in their decision-making, which has the potential to place their own or their loved ones' health, safety and well-being at risk.

The public deserves a system built on data it can trust.

About the Consumer Voice

The National Consumer Voice for Quality Long-Term Care was formed as the National Citizens' Coalition for Nursing Home Reform in 1975 because of public concern about substandard care in nursing homes. Today, the Consumer Voice is the leading national voice representing consumers on issues related to long-term care, helping to ensure that consumers are empowered to advocate for themselves.

About the Long Term Care Community Coalition (LTCCC)

LTCCC is a New York-based, non-profit organization dedicated to improving care and quality of life for individuals in nursing homes and other residential care settings. To accomplish its mission, LTCCC researches policies, laws and regulations affecting care for the elderly and disabled; advocates for state and national policies to improve care; educates consumers and other stakeholders on these policies; and works to engage government agencies and elected officials to improve quality, accountability and transparency.

The National Consumer Voice for Quality Long-Term Care (formerly NCCNHR) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit membership organization founded in 1975 by Elma L. Holder that advocates for quality care and quality of life for consumers in all long-term-care settings.