

# Embracing Again

Updated guidelines, positive trends allow for change in nursing homes visits

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OCONOMOWOC — Nursing home residents vaccinated against COVID-19 can get hugs again from their loved ones, and all residents may enjoy more indoor visits, the government said Wednesday in a step toward pre-pandemic normalcy.

At Shorehaven Senior Living Community in Oconomowoc, in-person visits and long-awaited embraces with family are underway. Administrator Emily Karls said there's "a lot more hugging, a lot more hand holding... it's great seeing them connect with their families." She said residents with memory loss in particular can benefit from the familiarity of a family member's touch.

Masks and social distancing are still in place. Karls said more than 97% of Shorehaven's residents have been vaccinated.

Chris Hampton drove five hours from Minnesota Wednesday to visit her parents Ray and Betty Heim at Shorehaven Tower, with the visit resulting in their first hug in a year.

"I saw them through plexiglass at Thanksgiving and for 20 minutes outside, under a tent, three tables away, last summer," Hampton said. "This is new, and wonderful, that we're able to hug in their apartment."

The policy guidance from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, or CMS, comes as coronavirus cases and deaths among nursing home residents have plummeted in recent weeks at the same time that vaccinations accelerated.

Karls said previously, appointments were needed for visits, but since Monday visitors are now able to come or go without one as long as the resident they're visiting has had at least two weeks since their second and final vaccination dose. For now, visitors should be from one household.

There's now talk of activity for the summer, Karls said. Pontoon boats will be put on the water, and there's discussion of picnics and trips to the facility's movie theater, library services and more.

Shorehaven Community Relations Director Sarah Williams-Berg said residents can now go to the Forgotten Treasures Resale Shop, giving them a bit of a shopping outlet.

Keeping things heading in the right direction will be crucial, however.

"People probably don't realize that how our county is doing reflects what we can do for our residents," Karls said. She encouraged locals to continue practicing precautions so the residents can keep enjoying these new steps towards normalcy.

There are other ways to help our older neighbors, too. Eras Senior Network Development Director Heather Uzowulu said volunteers are being accepted for yard cleanup, transporting seniors to appointments, shopping for clients and delivering food pantry stock boxes as well as participating in the weekly wellness call program. She said more drivers have returned as the pandemic circumstances have improved.

Figures from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that nearly 1.4 million nursing home residents and more than 930,000 staffers have been fully vaccinated. Nursing home cases peaked around the end of December and then declined sharply, particularly since the middle of January. Nationally, deaths among residents fell from 7,042 the week ending Dec. 20 to 1,112 the week ending March 7.

"It's night and day having the visitors and the families," Karls said. "The mood is lighter."

Contributing: The Associated Press