Nicole Alexander-Scott, MD, MPH, Director of the Rhode Island Department of Health (RIDOH), is recommending that all nursing homes and assisted living residences increase visitor restrictions for the next two weeks. This recommendation is made in response to the increasing number of patients diagnosed with COVID-19 globally, and in Rhode Island, at the onset of the influenza respiratory illness season.

Background
In March 2020, RIDOH issued visitor policy guidance in response to the increasing number of patients diagnosed with COVID-19 globally and in Rhode Island.

This Visitor Policy Guidance for all healthcare facilities was based on a three-level approach to visitation restrictions. Each level became increasingly restrictive:

- **Level 1**: Reduce visitation to protect vulnerable populations.
- **Level 2**: Limit visitation hours.
- **Level 3**: No visitation unless required under federal guidance, or in certain other circumstances.

In June 2020, because the number of cases of COVID-19 steadily declined in Rhode Island, RIDOH requested that facilities develop a facility-specific visitor plan in order to safely ease visitor restrictions. This relaxed visitor guidance balanced the importance of visitation with the need to protect residents, patients, staff, providers, and visitors. These plans addressed scheduling of visits, screening for COVID-19 symptoms, practicing social distancing, hand hygiene, wearing a cloth face covering or facemask (both residents and visitors) for the duration of their visit, physical location of the visit, cleaning and disinfecting, communication, and when to pause visitation.

On September 17, 2020, The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services released guidance, affirming the importance of visitation, while noting that visitation may still be restricted due to the COVID-19 county positivity rate in the county where the facility is located, the facility’s COVID-19 status, a resident’s COVID-19 status, visitor symptoms, lack of adherence to proper infection control practices, or other relevant factors related to the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency.

Unfortunately, in the last few weeks, COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations have been increasing, prompting the Director to re-issue her strong recommendation that all nursing and assisted living facilities transition back to Level 3 restrictions for a two-week period.

Regardless of the phase, facilities must have a process in place, at all times, to facilitate remote communications between a resident and a virtual visitor (e.g. video call applications on cell phones or tablets).
Visitation Level 1: Reduce visitation to protect vulnerable populations.

Visitation, including compassionate care visits, occurs according to the core principles of COVID-19 infection prevention, the facility visitation plan, and federal guidance.

Anyone who meets the conditions listed below are prohibited from visiting:
  o Feeling sick or having any symptoms or risk factors for COVID-19 including, but not limited to:
    o Cough
    o Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
    o Fever of chills
    o Muscle or body aches
    o Sore throat
    o Headache
    o Nausea or vomiting
    o Diarrhea
    o Runny nose or stuffy nose
    o Fatigue
    o Recent loss of taste
  o Unable to follow infection control principles to address COVID-19.

Visitation Level 2: Limit visiting hours.

Visitation, including compassionate care visits, occurs according to the core principles of COVID-19 infection prevention, the facility visitation plan, and federal guidance. Additionally, visitation is limited to a maximum of one three-hour block per day.

Anyone who meets the conditions listed below are prohibited from visiting:
  o Feeling sick or having any symptoms or risk factors for COVID-19 including, but not limited to:
    o Cough
    o Shortness of breath
    o Fever or chills
    o Muscle or body aches
    o Sore throat
    o Headache
    o Nausea or vomiting
    o Diarrhea
    o Runny nose or stuffy nose
    o Fatigue
    o Recent loss of taste
  o Unable to maintain infection control principles to address COVID-19.
Visitation Level 3: No visitation unless required under federal guidance, or in certain other circumstances.

- Visitation is suspended unless required under federal guidance (See September 17 CMS Guidance); or in certain other limited clinical circumstances, including compassionate care.

- Compassionate Care visits are allowed only under certain circumstances according to the core principles of COVID-19 infection prevention, the facility visitation plan, and federal guidance. Even under these circumstances, anyone who meets the conditions listed above is prohibited from visiting, in addition to those who are younger than 18.

Compassionate Care Visits
Compassionate care visits should be allowed at all levels of visitor restrictions. This includes, but is not limited to, end-of-life situations. Other case-by-case exceptions to these recommendations should be made with senior leadership involved in the decision-making for any compassionate care or exception requests. If members of the senior leadership have non-clinical questions related to the exception request, they should call RIDOH’s Center for Health Facilities Regulation at 401-222-2566. For questions about the clinical elements of the exception, they should call RIDOH’s COVID Unit at 401-222-8022 Monday through Friday 8:30 a.m. - 4:30 p.m. (after hours and on weekends: 401-276-8046).

Alternatives to In-Person Visitation
Regardless of the phase, facilities must have a process in place, at all times, to facilitate remote communications between a resident and a virtual visitor (e.g. video call applications on cell phones or tablets).