

Continuity and Communication in Family Councils

Two challenges frequently faced by family councils can be lack of continuity and difficulty with communication. Below are some tips for fostering continuity and improving communication.

Continuity

- Plan for the long-term stability of the group by putting structure in place, such as simple by-laws.
- Work to involve multiple leaders so that if key members of the council stop participating in the council or leave the facility, the group will continue.
- Invite family members of residents who die to continue to participate in the council.
- Frame each family council meeting (as an introduction for people attending for the first time, and as a reminder for those who attend regularly) with a brief introductory statement about “ground rules” for the meeting and the mission of the group.

Communication

- Communicate continually with facility staff and management to advise of any common concerns and suggestions, follow up on action to be taken, discuss family council activities, etc.
- To the extent possible, be part of the solution to problems or improvements to be made at the facility. When raising concerns, brainstorm for ideas about how the concern can be addressed.
- Ask the facility if you can put up a family council bulletin board in the main lobby of the facility to post notices about meetings and other information of interest to family members.
- Establish contact with the long-term care ombudsman. The ombudsman can act as a valuable resource.
- Facilitate communication within the council by following procedures for conducting effective meetings, such as: using agendas, starting and ending meetings on time, sticking to the topic scheduled for discussion, and “assigning” tasks for future activities to be accomplished before the next meeting.

- Make sure that all activities and communications have a purpose and will further progress the family council towards its goals.
- Focus on *common* goals.
- Briefly evaluate meetings afterwards to see if the meeting accomplished its purpose (communicating a certain point, coming up with ideas for addressing an issue, getting a commitment from facility staff about action to be taken), and make note of things to improve upon.
- Become familiar with the laws and regulations that apply to nursing homes.