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## National Rating System for Nursing Homes to Go Online in December

By **Stephen Baetge**  
Spectrum Staff Writer

A new, five-star system which helps consumers searching for a nursing home is scheduled to go online at the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) Nursing Home Compare Web site by the end of 2008.

The innovative new system rates America's nursing homes by giving each a "star" rating similar to that used in the hospitality industry.

CMS hopes the system will provide patients and their families with an easy-to-understand assessment of nursing home quality, making meaningful distinctions between high performing and low performing homes.

The ratings will be posted on the agency's Nursing Home Compare Web site by the end of this year.

"More than three million Americans rely on services provided by a nursing home at some point during the year. The new 'five-star' rating system will provide a composite view of the quality and safety information currently on Nursing Home Compare to help beneficiaries, their families, and caregivers compare nursing homes much easier," said Kerry Weems, CMS acting administrator.

CMS has made a concerted push to offer more and better nursing home information to consumers using its information Web site. Rated categories include quality, patient satisfaction, and cost of care.

CMS began its efforts with the earlier launch of a program that provides a nationwide identification of chronically under-performing nursing homes. Facilities enrolled in the Special Focus Facility (SFF) initiative are placed under special scrutiny and undergo twice as many inspections as other homes.

Last year, CMS also initiated a star rating system for health and prescription drug plans that are available to Medicare beneficiaries.

The five-star rating system will mark the first time CMS has offered such a rating system for the fee-for-service or traditional Medicare program. Currently, through the Compare Web site, CMS assists beneficiaries and their families in making nursing home choices by providing information on individual quality-of-care



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measures, staffing and survey inspection information.

"Nursing Home Compare's new rating system will also provide an incentive for nursing homes to strive toward earning a five-star rating by providing an environment of better quality care," Weems said.

This new rating system is rooted in the tradition of the Omnibus Budget Reduction Act of 1987 nursing home reform law and quality improvement campaigns such as the Advancing Excellence in America's Nursing Homes, a collaborative coalition of consumers, health care providers, labor and nursing home professionals.

CMS plans to work with other health care providers and consumers to make similar rating systems available for hospitals, home health agencies and end-stage renal disease facilities in the near future.

Also under consideration is adding new information to that already available on Nursing Home Compare, such as whether a nursing home specializes in caring for patients with dementia and those on ventilators or in need of specialized rehabilitation services.

Information on patient and family satisfaction with services at a facility may also be added to Nursing Home Compare site. The "Guide to Choosing a Nursing Home," a publication which includes information about the types of long-term care, local nursing home comparisons, and how to pay for nursing home care can also be found on the site.

"While Nursing Home Compare is very informative, it is important to note that this should be just one of the tools that family members and caregivers use in the selection of a nursing home," Weems concluded. "There is no substitute for visiting a nursing home in person and meeting with staff, residents and other families."

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