

Center for Medicaid and State Operations/Survey and Certification Group

Ref: S&C-09-05

**DATE:** October 10, 2008  
**TO:** State Survey Agency Directors  
**FROM:** Director  
Survey and Certification Group  
**SUBJECT:** Special Focus Facility (SFF) Program Survey Scoring Methodology

**Memorandum Summary**

**Special Focus Facility (SFF) Program Scoring Algorithm:** This memorandum provides specific details on the scoring methodology used to identify those nursing homes that become candidates for the SFF initiative by virtue of their more serious history of severe and persistent quality of care problems. We explain the method for scoring nursing home deficiency findings and survey results. The SFF methodology produces a score for identifying those facilities that merit closer survey attention through the SFF initiative.

The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) initiated the SFF program to address the challenges posed by a number of nursing homes that consistently provided poor quality of care, but periodically instituted enough improvement in the presenting problems that they would pass one survey only to fail the next (for many of the same problems as before). Such facilities with a “yo-yo” history rarely addressed underlying systemic problems that were giving rise to repeated cycles of serious deficiencies.

States, with the concurrence of the CMS Regional Office, select SFF nursing homes from a list of candidate facilities provided by CMS. After the State selects a SFF nursing home, the State will conduct standard surveys of the SFF nursing homes twice as frequently as other nursing homes. We apply CMS policy of progressive enforcement until the nursing home either (a) graduates from the SFF program or (b) is terminated from participation in the Medicare and/or Medicaid program(s).

The SFF program has been in existence since 1998 as part of the agency’s Nursing Home Quality Initiative. Effective in 2005 we expanded the program. We also regularly revised and improved both the scoring methods and our oversight processes as we learned more about effective ways to address the problem of persistent poor quality in some nursing homes. As future changes occur, we will post the pertinent information on the CMS Web site (see <http://www.cms.hhs.gov/certificationandcompliance/downloads/sfflist.pdf>).

CMS has also undertaken several efforts to bring more transparency and attention to the SFF program. Recent examples include:

- November 2, 2007 -- CMS issued guidance requiring notice to nursing home governing bodies, owners, and operators about a nursing home's SFF status, as well as the facility Administrator, State Medicaid agency, and State ombudsman program (see S&C Memo 08-02, accessible at:  
<http://www.cms.hhs.gov/SurveyCertificationGenInfo/PMSR/list.asp#TopOfPage>
- November 29, 2007 -- CMS began publishing the names of SFF nursing homes that had not improved at:  
[http://www.cms.hhs.gov/CertificationandCompliance/12\\_NHs.asp#TopOfPage](http://www.cms.hhs.gov/CertificationandCompliance/12_NHs.asp#TopOfPage)
- February 2008 – CMS began publishing the names of all SFF nursing homes that participate in the program.
- April 2008 -- CMS began identifying SFF nursing homes with a special icon on Nursing Home Compare at [www.medicare.gov](http://www.medicare.gov).

As CMS has increased its focus on SFF nursing homes, we recognize that there is an increasing interest in understanding the rationale and method for determining which nursing homes are selected for the SFF program. The attachment to the memorandum conveys specific details and will be posted on the CMS website accessible at:

[http://www.cms.hhs.gov/CertificationandCompliance/12\\_NHs.asp#TopOfPage](http://www.cms.hhs.gov/CertificationandCompliance/12_NHs.asp#TopOfPage)

**Effective Date:** This memorandum is informational only.

**Training:** The information contained in this letter should be shared with all survey and certification staff, their managers, and the State/RO training coordinators.

**Contact:** For questions about the SFF initiative, please contact your CMS Regional Office.

/s/

Thomas E. Hamilton

Attachment

cc: Survey and Certification Regional Office Management

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## SFF SCORING METHODOLOGY

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The scoring methodology for the Special Focus Facility (SFF) comprises two scores: the deficiency score and the revisit score. Results from the most recent surveys are weighted more heavily than results from earlier surveys. The SFF selection methodology may be understood as a five-step process:

- (1) **Health Deficiencies:** Health Deficiencies are scored and weighted,
- (2) **Revisits:** If the facility required more than one revisit to demonstrate substantial compliance, additional points are added to the SFF score,
- (3) **Weighting by Year:** Results are totaled and weights are assigned to each period, with more recent results weighted more heavily,
- (4) **List per State:** The facilities are grouped within each State and the 15 facilities with the highest SFF scores (i.e. most serious and persistent health care deficiency histories) are presented to the State for consideration as SFF facilities,
- (5) **State Recommendation and Selection:** Each State reviews the candidate list, brings its State-specific knowledge and information to bear (e.g. results of State licensure surveys), and recommends a final selection to CMS.

### 1. Health Care Deficiencies

Health care deficiencies identified during the most recent three standard survey cycles and during the last three years of complaint surveys represent the most significant factor in the identification of which facilities merit close attention in the SFF initiative. The more deficiencies, and the more serious or widespread those deficiencies, the higher the SFF deficiency score. A high SFF deficiency score indicates more serious quality of care problems compared to other facilities in the State.

The deficiency score includes deficiencies that are identified during (a) the last three standard (comprehensive) surveys, and (b) complaint surveys that occurred in each of the last three years and in which a deficiency was identified.

Each identified deficiency is evaluated according to two dimensions:

- (a) The scope of the deficiency (such as whether the deficiency was isolated to one person or was widespread throughout the nursing home), and
- (b) The severity of the deficiency (such as whether an individual suffered injury, harm, impairment, or death).

The Social Security Act and CMS regulations also identify certain deficiencies that are described as representing “substandard quality of care.” If a deficiency is among those in the substandard quality of care category, higher points are assigned. This methodology may be more easily perceived in the form of CMS’ well-known “scope and severity grid,” shown as Table 1 below.

**Table 1 Survey Deficiency Score: SFF Weights for Different Types of Deficiencies**

Severity	Scope		
	Isolated	Pattern	Widespread
Immediate jeopardy to resident health or safety	J - 50 points (75 points)	K - 100 points (125 points)	L - 150 points (175 points)
Actual harm that is not immediate jeopardy	G - 10 points	H - 20 points (25 points)	I - 30 points (35 points)
No actual harm with potential for more than minimal harm that is not immediate jeopardy	D - 2 points	E - 4 points	F - 6 points (10 points)
No actual harm with potential for minimal harm	A - 0 point	B - 0 points	C - 0 points

The shaded cells in Table 1 denote deficiency scope/severity levels that constitute substandard quality of care if the requirement that is not met is one that falls under the following federal regulations: 42 CFR 483.13 resident behavior and nursing home practices; 42 CFR 483.15, quality of life; 42 CFR 483.25, quality of care. Figures in parentheses in those shaded cells indicate points for deficiencies that are for substandard quality of care. For example, an “F-level) deficiency that is not considered part of substandard quality of care would be assigned 6 points, while an “F-level” deficiency that is within the substandard quality of care category would be assigned 10 points.

Complaint deficiency points are summed by provider for each annual period to produce three complaint survey scores. Standard deficiency points are summed by provider and by survey cycle to produce three standard survey scores.

**2. Revisits Necessary to Confirm Restored Compliance**

When a serious deficiency has been identified, CMS requires that a revisit be conducted to verify that the facility has been restored to substantial compliance with CMS quality of care and safety requirements. Usually the surveyors find that problems have been corrected and the surveys are able to verify substantial compliance in only one revisit. However, in some nursing homes the revisit survey finds that the facility remains out of compliance, and a second, third, or rarely a fourth revisit is necessary before the facility is able to demonstrate substantial compliance with federal nursing home requirements.

Facilities that require more than one revisit before being able to demonstrate substantial compliance have generally failed to make systemic changes in quality of care and quality of life and/or failed to monitor and re-evaluate care, treatment and services via the quality assessment and assurance process. Such facilities are more likely to exhibit a yo-yo pattern of non-compliance. The number of revisits that are conducted represents an indicator of more serious problems in achieving or sustaining compliance. We therefore assign additional SFF points to a facility for each additional revisit after the first revisit. As shown in Table 2 below, 50 points are assigned for the second revisit needed to demonstrate substantial compliance on the health certification portion of each standard survey, 75 for the third revisit, and 100 for a fourth revisit. Note that revisit points are added only for standard surveys, not for complaint surveys.

**Table 2: Revisit Scoring**

<b>Revisit Number</b>	<b>Noncompliance Points</b>
First	0
Second	50 points
Third	75 additional points
Fourth	100 additional points

**3. Weighting by Period**

For each provider, the deficiency score and revisit score are summed to create a total score for each of the three periods. In calculating the SFF score, more recent scores are weighted more heavily than results from earlier surveys. The most recent period is assigned a weighting factor of 1/2, the previous period has a weighting factor of 1/3 and the second prior survey has a weighting factor of 1/6. The weighted period scores are then summed to create the overall SFF score. Standard survey periods refer to the period in which the standard surveys are completed (generally from 9-15 months from the earlier standard period). Each nursing home therefore has three standard surveys included in its SFF scoring. Deficiency findings from complaint investigations are standardized in 12-month periods so all nursing homes are treated in the same way (for three 12-month periods).

**4. Example calculation**

On the most recent standard survey Nursing Home A had one deficiency at scope and severity “G.” This deficiency required one revisit to correct. Nursing Home A had no complaint deficiencies during the most recent 12 months. Therefore Nursing Home A receives 10 points for the most recent period. In the prior period Nursing Home A had one standard survey and two complaint surveys. The standard survey had one “D” level deficiency and one “G” level deficiency. The “G” level deficiency required 2 revisits to correct, while the “D” level deficiency required one revisit. There were no deficiencies on the complaint surveys. Nursing Home A receives a total of 62 points for the second period: 12 points for the deficiencies and 50 points for the second revisit. During the third period, Nursing Home A had one standard and 1 complaint survey. The nursing home had one “D” level deficiency on each of those surveys. As a result, Nursing Home A receives 4 points for this period. Nursing Home A’s total SFF score for the three periods equals  $1/2*10 + 1/3*62 + 1/6*4$ , or 26 points.

**5. List by State**

Based on the deficiencies and weighting of those deficiencies, scores for each nursing home within each State are calculated and provided to each State. States are instructed to consider the 15 nursing homes with the highest SFF scores for SFF final selection. States and CMS Regional Offices work together to select the SFF nursing home. It is important to note that the SFF candidate list is pre-decisional. It is also a document that constantly changes as survey outcomes change.

## **6. SFF Final Selection**

Each State reviews the candidate list, brings its State-specific knowledge and information to bear (e.g., results of State licensure surveys), and recommends a final selection to CMS. CMS accepts the State recommendation in almost all cases, but reserves the right to have a different selection made in unusual circumstances.