

Division of Health Systems Development and Regulation
Health Protection
Licensure and Certification
Public Health Preparedness and Response
Rural Health

MEMORANDUM

TO: Nursing Homes
Assisted Living Centers

FROM: Todd McCaskell, Medical Facilities Engineer Supervisor 
Office of Health Care Facilities Licensure and Certification

RE: Use of door alarms at your main door

DATE: September 5, 2013

Our survey teams continue to identify a number of issues with the alarming of exterior doors in nursing homes and assisted living centers. The Administrative Rules of South Dakota (ARSD) 44:04:02:17(6) is the rule which pertains to nursing homes and ARSD 44:70:02:17(5) is the rule which pertains to assisted living centers that are licensed to house individuals with cognitive impairment. The administrative rules state that a facility shall "Install an electrically activated audible alarm on all unattended exit doors. Other exterior doors must be locked or alarmed. The alarm must be audible at a designated nurses' station and may not automatically silence when the door is closed"

The intent of this regulation is to prevent resident elopements. Unfortunately, we have experienced elopement deaths where door alarms were not installed, not armed, not working correctly, or there was not a proper staff response to the door alarm.

We understand it can be disruptive to have the door alarm at the main door of your facility armed at all times. Therefore we will allow an exception to that rule. At the main door where family and visitors enter your facility during the busy day time hours we will allow your facility to have the door alarm disarmed provided all of the following conditions are met;

- There is a reasonable expectation that staff can frequently monitor that door during those hours.
- The facility properly assesses residents for cognitive impairment and risk of elopement.
- A wander management system sounds an alarm if the resident passes near or through the main doorway.
- There is a written policy regarding the arming and disarming of door alarms.

We recognize that each facility is unique regarding floor plans, staffing levels, staff shift changes, visitor patterns, and residents. Policies regarding door alarms must recognize these factors as well as the change of the seasons and changes in the weather. The decision to deactivate a door alarm should never be taken lightly.