

Ontario's front-line workers getting pay hike of \$4 an hour during pandemic

Wendy Gillis

Front-line workers, including long-term-care home staff, personal support workers and shelter employees, will get a financial boost after the province announced a pandemic pay raise Saturday — money to acknowledge the risk each worker is taking in the ongoing fight against COVID-19.

“It’s our way of saying thank you to over 350,000 front-line, long-term-care workers, health-care workers, and other front-line staff,” Premier Doug Ford said Saturday at a Queen’s Park briefing.

Effective immediately, employees who are providing front-line and support services, including cleaning and meal preparation at health-care facilities, are eligible for a raise of \$4 per hour for the next 16 weeks.

Staff who work more than 100 hours per month would receive an additional \$250 per month for each of the next four months — meaning eligible employees who pull a 40-hour week could receive \$3,560 in additional compensation, according to the provincial government.

The money is also intended to help “front-line providers attract and hire extra staff they need to continue taking care of patients and residents,” Ford said.

The province said in a statement that those who are eligible include staff working in long-term care and retirement homes, emergency shelters, supportive housing, social services congregate care settings, corrections institutions and youth justice facilities, home and community care providers, and some staff in hospitals.

Although the money is intended to provide an extra boost for the next few months, Ford said the COVID-19 crisis has exposed “deeply rooted, long-standing cracks in our long-term-care system,” and called on the federal government to make a “sustained” commitment to health and long-term care.

“We need to do better. And we will do better,” Ford said.

Ontario’s long-term-care homes have been at the epicentre of the COVID-19 pandemic in Ontario, where many deaths have occurred in recent weeks as outbreaks have hit centres housing vulnerable elderly populations. But the province has come under fire for [not providing the most up-to-date and accurate information](#) about how many such deaths have occurred.

Dr. Merrilee Fullerton, Ontario’s minister of long-term care, said at Saturday’s press conference that her ministry is now getting its information “straight from the homes and trying to put that together in a more timely way.” She acknowledged delays have been caused because of different routes the data was taking, to either Public Health Ontario or her ministry.

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“We’re working on closing this gap and making sure that all the information is transparent and getting out as quickly as it can be confirmed,” Fullerton said.

In an email Saturday, Hayley Chazan, spokesperson for the Minister of Health Christine Elliott, said Ontario “largely relies” on local public health units to report on COVID-19 in the community and in long-term-care homes, through the integrated Public Health Information System (iPHIS).

At the same time, the ministry of long-term care has started collecting COVID-19 information in long-term-care homes through a network of inspectors, Chazan said.

“We have been clear that we are aware there is an inevitable lag in the data provided by iPHIS. We have also been clear that we want to ensure we continue to do everything we can to provide the public and media with the most relevant and timely information as possible,” Chazan said.

The province’s COVID-19 reporting now includes the latest numbers from both iPHIS and the Ministry of Long-Term Care, she said.

As Ford and his ministers held the press conference Saturday, dozens of people could be seen protesting at Queen’s Park, and videos shared on Twitter showed protestors chanting “The virus is a hoax” and “Fear is the virus!” outside the legislature.

Asked about the protestors, Ford grew visibly angry, calling them “yahoos” and saying their “reckless” actions are putting the rest of the province in jeopardy.

“Looking out the window, we see these people who are absolutely irresponsible. It’s reckless to do what they are doing, and personally I think it’s selfish,” Ford said.

Ford noted there are health-care providers just a few blocks away working “around the clock” to protect the community, while the vast majority of the province is doing its part to flatten the curve by staying home.

“And then, we have a bunch of yahoos in front of Queen’s Park, sitting there protesting that the place isn’t open,” he said. “They are breaking the law and putting everyone in jeopardy — putting themselves in jeopardy, putting the workers in jeopardy, and God forbid one of them ends up in the hospital down the street.”

Ford said he understands that people want to get back to normal, “but we have to be responsible” and begin to open up the economy through the guidance of Ontario’s chief medical officer of health.

“We’ve come such a long way, and then we have these people who just want to break ranks with 14.5 million people, just go rogue? It’s irresponsible, reckless and it’s selfish. It just burns me up,” Ford said.

Toronto police spokesperson Meaghan Gray said no tickets were issued at Saturday’s protest, saying the crowd was “compliant” and practised good social distancing.

With files from Miriam Lafontaine

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