

'You miss visitors a lot!' Kawartha Lakes resident on life in long-term care

Sarah Sobanski

It is a tough time for residents of long-term care facilities and their families as the coronavirus pandemic drives a physical wedge between loved ones.

Deadly COVID-19 outbreaks in seniors residences across the country have left both residents and their families on edge.

In Kawartha Lakes, the virus hit close to home with an outbreak at Pinecrest Nursing Home in Bobcaygeon. It claimed nearly 30 lives in the span of a few short weeks.

Long-term care facilities have locked down with strict no-visitor policies as a precaution against outbreaks during the pandemic.

"You miss visitors a lot," says retired kindergarten teacher Mary Perry, 83, who lives at [Caressant Care](#) in Lindsay. She's used to her son Mike and his children coming to visit at least once a week.

"I told my granddaughter 'Minnie' is keeping me company until you get back," she adds, noting the stuffed Disney character her granddaughter forgot last time she came to visit in person.

In the early days of the pandemic, the Perrys were able to visit Mary from the outside of Caressant Care. They'd wave and send kisses through the window, helping keep her in high spirits. As restrictions have increased, they can't visit as often.

Mary says she and the other residents are trying to stay positive.

"You don't hear many people complaining," she says. She adds she has things to keep her busy: talking to people on the phone, reading, crosswords. The activities help keep her mind off the news.

Staying positive and keeping her mind off it seem to be the only things to do. Mary says there isn't much more that can be done at Caressant Care to protect from the virus. If it happens, it happens.

"It's a terrible thing this virus," she says. "The staff is pretty amazing that they have the courage to come to work every day when there's this awful virus, and they could take it home to their children."

Mike echoes praise of the staff at Caressant Care. He says "despite what they're going through, they've always made time to talk and help and have done so graciously and with a smile."

Mike says his family is keeping a "close eye" on his mom during the pandemic. He agrees it's a scary time and his heart goes out to those who've been unable to be with

their elderly loved ones facing outbreaks where they live.

“We just respect the rules, and endure some of the hardship for the safety and health of others,” Mike says of what can be done before the virus ends. “Use the new options that are in place from a video visit to more phone calling, basically doing the best they can.”

He says if there’s anything positive to come from this crisis, it’s the reminder of how valuable human contact is and how technology can bring us together instead of tearing us apart.

While much of clinical social worker Mary Walling-Field’s focus during the pandemic has been on food and finances for her Community Care Access Centre (CCAC) clients, she said the disconnect from society is a difficult issue to address.

“Many seniors have their family and friends checking in on them and making sure they have what they need; even if it’s only just to call to say ‘how are you doing today?’” said Walling-Field.

In other cases personal support workers are still going into homes to care for clients. Even if it’s only once a week, it’s still social, human contact; a need that is amplified by COVID-19.

Walling-Field not only continues to converse with her clients, but also those who had helped create a social wellness support group about seven years ago. The goal of the group – many of whom were newcomers to the community or alone following the loss of a spouse - was to share information about what is happening in the community and how to access it while also giving them the opportunity to expand their social network.

Many even went so far as to volunteer for local groups. An added bonus came to those who chose the local library as they also became members and have, for the past month, accessed a variety of online resources including movies and books.

The group recently held their first Zoom meeting, giving everyone a chance to talk to one another again and even sing Happy Birthday to one member.

Community Care Health & Care Network director of clinical services Margot Fitzpatrick, said the agency is also developing a reassurance team to help reduce loneliness and the stress of being isolated.

“And we’re working with Home and Community Care [CCAC] to share information on supports and resources with seniors,” said Fitzpatrick. “It’s a really hard thing when you can’t go into the home to see these people or for them to take their loved one to an Adult Day program . . . so we have to find other ways.”

The Care Crew is one of these, said Fitzpatrick.

Composed of volunteers, the group is meant to support Community Care clients by providing services where possible to help them replace what cannot be accessed due to the pandemic. This can be anything from picking up groceries and cleaning products to medications.

“Handling the money piece is certainly a challenge, but we’re managing,” said

Fitzpatrick.

While it is nice to have someone, Walling-Field encourages seniors to also 'help themselves' by sticking to routines, getting enough sleep, eating well, staying active, finding ways to relax, such as reading or listening to music, and, perhaps most important of all, limiting social media and news on the pandemic.

"If we all just take this one day at a time, we will get through this," said Walling-Field.