

UPDATE: 9 residents of Bobcaygeon nursing home have now died of COVID-19

This Week

The deaths of nine Pinecrest Nursing Home residents has not only unmasked the impact of an under-funded health care system, but is demonstrating the frightening potential of COVID-19, a Bobcaygeon doctor says.

Dozens of other residents at the Bobcaygeon long-term care facility are ill and more than half of its staff have presented with coronavirus symptoms. The Haliburton, Kawartha, Pine Ridge District health unit reported last week that 17 of the 34 workers had tested positive. Others tested negative, including Dr. Steve Oldridge.

The health unit confirmed Monday (March 30) there have been seven COVID-19-related deaths at Pinecrest since an outbreak was declared at the facility on March 18. There are also currently 24 staff members who have confirmed positive for COVID-19; test results are pending for 10 staff.

In total, the health unit reports 33 confirmed cases with two sporadic cases, one of which is related to Pinecrest.

“Pinecrest should be a wake up call to everyone as to just how deadly this virus can be,” said Dr. Oldridge who works with medical director, Dr. Michelle Snarr, to provide care to residents at the home. “The province is in a state of emergency for a reason. Nine of the 66 residents have died. . . We need to lock the doors. We can’t let it get out.”

Oldridge told *This Week* the past few days have taken “more of an emotional toll than the physical” as he worries, not just about his own health, but that of his staff, his patients and the staff who work at nursing homes like Pinecrest.

“The staff were run off their feet long before this virus even hit . . . PSWs in particular are already overworked and underpaid,” said Oldridge. “I know Dr. Snarr has gone above and beyond lobbying all corners for support and is quite frustrated as well. The staff are the real heroes in all this. They are facing a huge risk, even with the use of PPE, to look after these residents. . . They’re the real front-line for those patients.”

Oldridge also doesn’t fault health units.

“They were already working on a skeleton staff before this hit. This [virus] is proving why we need to support public health; why we need get more feet on the ground. COVID is unmasking just how underfunded the whole system is,” he said.

Kawartha Lakes Ward 2 councillor Kathleen Seymour-Fagan doesn't believe the severity of the outbreak at Pinecrest was properly communicated to the community, city and province. She said each has been working to provide extra resources to the long-term care facility, but without a clear picture it was hard to act.

"The three residents testing positive, and the staff being tested, there was such a lag, and there's still a lag. At that point it really should have gone out from the nursing home or from public health how serious this is," she said. "They assume that if three of them are positive, the entire home has it."

The current COVID-19 outbreak at Pinecrest is the worst in Ontario. Seymour-Fagan says how bad the outbreak is is now just setting in for residents of Bobcaygeon. Until this point, those involved with Pinecrest — loved ones of residents and care-takers, for example — may not have been taking an abundance of caution to isolate from the rest of the small community because they didn't know.

"If the community had known more, there would've been more caution taken on behalf of the community," she said. She added the virus is "real" for residents now, as it could affect or be affecting someone they know.

"When it happens in your own community, it's real... This has really shed some light on the severity of this," she said before urging residents to stay home. She said Pinecrest was a "community home" and it's "heart-breaking" what has happened.

Seymour-Fagan said she expected community spread of the virus and that it would probably get worse before it got better.

"Although we've had this outbreak, we're a fantastic community — strong, people work together," she said. She added she's already had a number of people reach out to help. The community has announced a Bobcaygeon and Area COVID-19 Relief Fund to support Pinecrest workers and loved-ones of the residents there.

On Monday (March 30), Haliburton-Kawartha Lakes-Brock MP Jamie Schmale — who grew up in Bobcaygeon— posted his support to Facebook.

"I can't imagine what the residents and family of the people living at Pinecrest in Bobcaygeon are going through," he writes. "The struggle to secure new staff to work in that facility has been difficult, but thanks to the help of the province and professional nursing and support organizations, a number of brave volunteers, including recent PSW graduates, have stepped forward to care for the residents. . . My heart goes out to all the current staff who are at home dealing with a positive COVID-19 infection and a huge thank you to those who continue to work knowing the circumstances."

Oldridge continues to urge everyone to follow safety protocols, especially washing hands frequently, staying home and practicing social isolation when in public until told otherwise.

"This isn't something that is going to go away in a few weeks. We need to take this very seriously. We need to stop the spread of this. We need to flatten the curve," said Oldridge who is particularly concerned about the many seniors — especially those in nursing homes — and individuals with compromised immune systems. "These are the most frail in our community. We need to isolate and let the virus run its course to give these people a chance."