

Visits resume next week at Ontario's nursing and retirement homes

Rob Ferguson

Ontario is allowing visitors back into nursing homes, retirement homes, group homes and shelters in time for Father's Day — but with strict conditions.

The move follows pressure from families concerned about loved ones in care, particularly nursing homes where there have been more than 300 outbreaks of COVID-19 with dire conditions in dozens of facilities and almost 1,800 deaths.

Visitors must have tested negative for the virus in the previous two weeks, wear face masks, maintain physical distancing, clean their hands upon arrival and departure, and pass a screening questionnaire as part of efforts to prevent spreading infections.

The visits can begin next Thursday but only in homes without outbreaks of COVID-19.

Premier Doug Ford called it a “cautious restart” and acknowledged the strain on families and vulnerable residents isolated from each other since March, but said it was necessary to prevent an even larger loss of life.

“I know the tremendous toll this has taken on people,” said Ford, whose mother-in-law is in long-term care and had COVID-19.

The requirement for a negative test and continued ban on homes with outbreaks is “ridiculous,” said caregiver advocate Vivian Stamatopoulos.

“This was a slap in the face,” she wrote on Twitter.

Family activists have warned that the visitor ban allowed deplorable conditions to fester, putting lives at risk — including 82-year-old Pietro Bruccoleri at Woodbridge Vista Care Community in Vaughan who died May 29 of exhaustion from malnutrition.

“They worry that without family visits, their loved one won't get enough food, fluids or personal care,” said NDP Leader Andrea Horwath.

Given the carnage in nursing homes to date, resuming visits will require “iron clad” testing and contact tracing, added Green Leader Mike Schreiner.

“The Ford government will need to do a better job of keeping COVID-19 out of long-term-care homes by improving minimum standards of care, the number of registered nurses, and access to PPE (personal protective equipment).”

A Canadian Armed Forces report based on observations from military medical teams in five of the hardest-hit nursing homes exposed horrific examples of residents left in bed for days or weeks, in soiled diapers for long periods, inadequately fed or

forcefully fed to the point of choking.

“In some homes, the staffing collapsed,” said Long-Term Care Minister Merrilee Fullerton, who added the province is considering whether to allow “designated” family care givers into all homes to assist their loved ones.

She defended the length of time it took the province to issue a takeover order for Woodbridge Vista Care, which was placed under control of William Osler hospital last Thursday.

A takeover is “a whole process in collaboration with the home,” she told reporters, acknowledging the death was a “tragic case” and an investigation into negligence at the home has begun.

Horwath has repeatedly called for the province to issue takeover orders for all nursing homes in crisis to save lives to give families piece of mind and residents a better shot at survival.

“In this broken system, their parent or grandparent may also being going without the hands-on care they need to protect their health,” Horwath added.

Fullerton said the number of high-risk homes in “code red” status is down to 10, a drop from 19 at the start of June. She has refused to release a list of them.

Visits to eligible homes that are not in outbreak — still a problem for 65 of Ontario's 626 nursing homes — must be scheduled in advance, Fullerton added.

In long-term care, at least one visitor will be allowed weekly but visits must take place outdoors where it is more difficult for the virus to spread.

In retirement homes, visits can be indoors or outdoors in resident's rooms or designated areas. The number of visitors is at the discretion of the home.

At group homes and shelters, two people can visit a resident at any one time.

Fullerton said the province is in talks with the federal government to keep military medical teams in the first five nursing homes they assisted beyond Friday's deadline for departure.

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