

Care Partners are Not Visitors: Access to Long-Term Care in the “New Normal”

September 9, 2020

Care partners¹ are so much more than visitors. They play a vital role in the wellbeing of long-term care residents, and are actively involved in care delivery, planning, and decisions. This role goes far beyond the benefits of social interaction and casual visits. Limiting care partner access has a direct impact on resident quality of life, and the ability of care partners to support their family member or friend.

When community transmission of Covid-19 was first confirmed in Ontario in March of 2020, the province rightly began a process of escalating restrictions and closures. As the tragic toll of the pandemic in our long-term care homes became apparent, actions were taken to largely close homes to outside access. These actions were right and justified.

As a direct result of the sacrifices of families, care partners, staff, and most of all residents, as of September 2nd there are thirteen long-term care homes in active outbreak and one active case among residents. The pandemic is far from over, but we are now in a position to plan for the “new normal”.

Inconsistent and insufficient care partner access to long-term care homes cannot be part of this new reality.

Prolonged isolation of long-term care residents, especially those living with dementia², risks irreversible physical and mental harm, increases in responsive behaviours, and deterioration in functional and cognitive ability³. For far too many families and care partners, Covid-19 has robbed them of the opportunity to say goodbye to their family member or friend—and all have lost precious time together.

Covid-19 is not the only threat facing long-term care residents. As the disease is brought under control, and steps are taken to build an “iron ring” around residents, the effects of isolation match or outweigh the risk from Covid-19. In seeking to protect long-term care residents, we must not inadvertently do more harm than good.

¹ The Ontario Caregiver Coalition defines care partners/caregivers as: “people of all ages who provide essential and often ongoing personal, financial, social, psychological, emotional and physical support, assistance and care, for family members and friends in need of support due to frailty, physical/mental illness, degenerative disease, physical/cognitive/mental disability, addictions, or end of life. Caregivers may be spouses, parents, siblings, children and youth, extended family members, friends, neighbours, or the family people choose.”

² Nearly 90% of long-term care residents in Ontario live with a form of cognitive impairment, including over two-thirds who have a diagnosis of dementia.

³ National Institute on Ageing. (2020). Finding the Right Balance: An Evidence-Informed Guidance Document to Support the Re-Opening of Canadian Long-Term Care Homes to Family Caregivers and Visitors during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Toronto, ON: National Institute on Ageing Guidance Document.

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Policies and restrictions governing access to long-term care homes must treat care partner access as a necessity, and the right of residents to welcome visitors into their home must not be unnecessarily infringed⁴. Every decision affecting care partner access must be founded on the respect, dignity, and individuality of residents.

Any restrictions placed on access must be based solely on resident safety, not on limited staff and/or PPE resources. In the event a home lacks sufficient face coverings, gowns, or gloves to safely allow care partners into the home, the solution is procuring more PPE, not banning care partners. Innovative approaches that do not require large investments, such as recruiting volunteers and/or students to monitor distancing and PPE usage during visits, could be employed to address staff shortages.

Every effort must be made to support the safe and consistent return of care partners to long-term care homes, beyond compassionate visits at end-of-life. The number one priority of all care partners is the safety of their loved one: care partners will fully cooperate with any precautions that will protect residents.

Care partner access cannot be treated as an inconvenience. If the safe return of care partners means additional costs for staff and PPE, these costs must be incurred.

We urge the Ministry of Long-Term Care to ensure all long-term care homes have the supplies and support necessary to provide near-normal levels of access to care partners, and that no home is restricting care partner access due to a barrier that could be overcome without compromising resident safety. This is the right of all residents, and is essential to their and their care partner's mental and physical wellbeing.

⁴ *Long-Term Care Homes Act, 2007* section 3 (1) 14.