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PROVINCIAL POLITICS

Families visiting nursing homes don't require proof of COVID test, officials say

By **Rob Ferguson** Queen's Park Bureau

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Families visiting loved ones in nursing homes don't have to show proof they have tested negative for COVID-19, health officials say.

A clarification came Wednesday from Ontario's chief coroner, Dr. Dirk Huyer, who has taken on responsibilities for the provincial testing regime that requires anyone visiting a long-term-care resident to have been checked and cleared in the previous two weeks.

There has been a misunderstanding at some long-term-care facilities because the provincial policy requires an "attestation" of a negative test.

"It does not require the documents," Huyer told reporters Wednesday as the number of nursing homes with outbreaks of the highly contagious virus fell by four to 62 according to figures released Wednesday by the Ministry of Health.

Visits are not allowed at homes with outbreaks, which can be cases in residents or a staff member recovering at home in self-isolation.

Nursing-home employees are continuing to catch COVID-19, with the number of active cases in staff rising by 22 to 368. It is not known whether they caught the virus in the community or on the job.

"It is perhaps a reflection of the gradual reopening of the economy, which we're watching very carefully," Health Minister Christine Elliott said.

"It is a concern whenever we see the numbers going forward, and especially with respect to long-term-care homes, because the populations there are so vulnerable."

About 1,800 nursing-home residents have died in the pandemic, which has seen 5,400 infected with COVID-19. Of those cases, 205 remain active.

Premier Doug Ford said families whose loved ones died or had other troubles in long-term care are welcome to testify at his promised "independent commission" into how the novel coronavirus hit nursing homes so hard.

"As the commission moves forward, people will be able to come out and tell their story," said Ford, who has pledged the effort will begin in July but has not yet named a commissioner, terms of reference or a location.

"I want to hear the stories, I've heard a lot of stories, mind you, but I want to hear the stories until it never happens again," added Ford.

While the premier has acknowledged the nursing home system is "broken," NDP Leader Andrea Horwath is calling for a full judicial public inquiry into how it was unprepared for COVID-19.

Overall, Ontario has declined to 2,049 active cases of the virus that has infected just over 36,000 people in the province since late January.

A Star compilation of data from health units Wednesday at 6 p.m. showed another 203 confirmed and probable cases in the previous 24 hours, with another 14 deaths raising the toll to 2,677 fatalities.

The number of people in hospital with COVID-19 fell by 10 to 278 with 73 in intensive care and 48 on ventilators to breathe, down from 75 and 54 the previous day, according to the Ministry of Health figures.



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