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PROVINCIAL POLITICS

Long-term-care homes up pressure on Premier Doug Ford to help industry prepare for second wave of COVID-19

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

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Devastated by COVID-19, nursing homes are ramping up the pressure on Premier Doug Ford to help the industry prepare for a second wave by training an “army” of infection prevention and control specialists.

The plea came Friday as the death toll in long-term-care approached 1,800, one-third of the 5,400 vulnerable residents who caught the highly contagious virus.

More masks and other personal protective equipment are needed, with a continued emphasis on testing, retrofits of older homes with four-bed rooms that made it difficult to contain the spread of COVID-19, and technology to enable more digital medical assessments for residents, said the Ontario Long-Term Care Association.

The measures are urgently needed to avoid a repeat of the “tragedy” that unfolded in the first wave, added association president Donna Duncan.

While the number of outbreaks and infections in nursing homes has declined in recent weeks, “we can’t let up the pedal with a potential second wave coming as early as this summer,” she warned.

Duncan has previously raised concerns that it was difficult for some nursing homes to get doctors in to assess residents during the height of the pandemic in April, making it important to have virtual medical care in place.

Infection prevention and control is also key, with COVID-19 making 2,154 employees ill and killing seven. That left a number of homes desperately short of staff — some losing 80 per cent to illness and absenteeism driven by fear.

Dire situations prompted Ford to call in Canadian Armed Forces medical teams at six hard-hit homes where care levels deteriorated to frightening levels, and to issue takeover orders for almost a dozen long-term-care facilities enabling local hospitals to manage their day-to-day operations.

Hospitals also sent teams of doctors, nurses, cleaners and other staff into other struggling nursing homes in need of assistance to stabilize care.

More integration with the broader health-care system is essential, said Duncan, whose association represents the majority of Ontario’s 626 nursing homes, including for-profit, municipal, charity, and not-for-profit operators.

Last month, she sounded the alarm that the nursing home industry, which cares for 80,000 residents with about 80,000 full- and part-time employees, has lost half its staff, presenting serious challenges for recruitment and care levels going forward.

Ford has promised an “independent commission” into the impacts of COVID-19 in nursing homes will begin in July, although his government has not named a commissioner or set terms of reference.

Ontario Ombudsman Paul Dube is also investigating.

Ministry of Health statistics released Friday indicate nursing homes are still fighting 66 outbreaks of COVID-19, up three from a week ago following a steady drop from more than 300 at the height of the first wave.

The stall in the decline after weeks of progress shows how difficult the virus can be to eradicate in the close quarters of long-term care, with 320 active cases in residents and 371 remaining sick.

Overall, the number of active cases across the province fell by 79 people to 2,281, with the government reporting a sixth straight day with fewer than 200 new infections.

The number of patients in hospital with COVID-19 continued to fall, with 331 patients including 82 in intensive care and 65 of them on ventilators. That’s down from 527 patients with 114 in ICU and 84 on vents a week ago.

Labs across the province processed 27,225 tests Thursday, according to the ministry figures.



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