



Family Caregiver Insights

LTC Brief

January 2022

Introduction

As long-term care homes across Ontario navigate the 4th wave of the COVID-19 pandemic and spread of the Omicron variant, it is imperative that residents, family caregivers and frontline home staff receive timely support, guidance, and leadership. FCO has flagged a list of topics and recommendations based on feedback received from family caregivers and sector partners in response to current directives and recent trends in LTC across the province.

1. Social Isolation of Residents

Whilst provisions have been put in place to address the outbreak spike fuelled by the highly transmissible Omicron variant, the adverse effects of social isolation on residents continues to be a major concern for family caregivers. The halting of visits, prohibition of social outings, and designation of 2 caregivers per resident has greatly impacted the mental, physical, emotional, and cognitive health of residents. We highly recommend the following be considered alongside appropriate COVID-19 IPAC and safety measures:

- **Cohort residents based on units/neighbourhoods**

Allow safe cohorting of residents who are COVID-19 negative and do not show any symptoms and/or isolate symptomatic and residents that have tested positive. Cohorting residents based on units or neighbourhoods will allow residents to continue to socialize with their peers while reducing the risk of COVID-19 transmission between units. This would balance risk of COVID with the need for socialization for residents.

- **Allow communal dining when possible**

Creative opportunities for safe communal dining during mealtimes for residents who are COVID-19 negative and do not show any symptoms. Residents and families report that communal dining is an important social activity and can increase the desires of residents to eat and drink. Having residents eat together in one space can also reduce demands on staff time arising from residents eating in their rooms.

- **Utilize 3x vaccinated volunteers for wellness support for residents**

Allow homes to train and support volunteers to provide social, emotional, and cognitive support to residents who either do not have designated caregivers or who require additional support.

- **Repeal the maximum of designated caregivers per resident**

Remove the maximum limit of caregivers per resident so paid and unpaid caregivers can be adequately utilized to meet resident needs and alleviate staff pressure. Maintaining the restriction on the number of caregivers who can visit at a time will maintain the risk reduction without the stress that a limit of designated caregivers places on those designated caregivers, or the challenges of balancing access of paid and unpaid caregivers. See more below.

- **Distribute N95 masks to all staff and caregivers**

Ensure that all staff and caregivers who enter LTC spaces are provided with N95s and appropriate PPE to protect residents as they work and visit. This will reduce the overall risk of COVID-19 transmission with the LTC home.

2. Staff & Caregiver COVID-19 Testing

Families have shared their concern with the mandatory Rapid Antigen Test (RAT or rapid test) wait times for caregivers in contrast to home staff and how this discrepancy may impact the rate of COVID-19 transmission in any given home.

As per Directive #3, the difference in wait times for PCR test results for LTC home staff (immediate entry with appropriate PPE) and caregivers (entry upon a negative result) has resulted in confusion and apprehension. As there are homes in outbreak without resident cases, caregivers are rightly concerned that allowing staff into the home prior to receiving their negative test result creates a high risk of COVID entering the home via staff, leading the residents suffering restrictions to their activities (dining, leaving their room) and negative impacts on their health and wellbeing. We recommend that baseline universal testing protocols be implemented for all individuals entering LTC spaces for continuity and enhanced safety.

3. Care & Delivery Practices

Our team has received reports from families regarding the suspension of important physical care delivery for residents including baths, showers, and hair washing. While the delivery of these services may be impacted due to staff shortages across the province, resident hygiene is a priority and correlates to their overall mental, emotional, physical, and cognitive health. We strongly recommend that the MLTC flag this topic and consider alternative outbreak protocols to increase staff and caregiver capacity to provide residents with physical care, especially for those who do not have ongoing caregiver support.

4. Designated Caregiver Maximum

Caregivers in LTC are invaluable as they play an integral role in the delivery of care for residents across Ontario. With the implementation of the designated caregiver maximum to 2 per resident policy, many families have had to make difficult decisions in regards to how their loved one living LTC will receive ongoing support without major disruption. To allow for residents to see the individuals involved in their care plans, receive assistance from paid care practitioners (if applicable) and decrease caregiver and staff burnout, we recommend the repealing policies on designated caregiver limits. As residents have different acuities and needs, a one-size fits all approach hinders the delivery of service to those who require assistance from multiple individuals.

5. LTC Home Communication

Many families have expressed frustration with the lack of updates they're receiving from their respective LTC homes regarding outbreaks, staffing levels, IPAC protocols and more in a timely manner. We recommend that the MLTC share prompts with LTC homes to encourage proactive and transparent communication with caregivers. Various LTC associations and organizations can also be utilized by MLTC to share important updates and best practices for disseminating directives.

Family Councils Ontario and many LTC sector stakeholders are aware of the implications of the Omicron variant and its impact on the most vulnerable. As we navigate new challenges presented by the variant, we encourage LTC Homes and caregivers to work together to ensure residents receive support and quality care.

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