



The Other One Percent?

Canadian Seniors' Perspectives on the Protection of Seniors in Long Term Care in Canada

**Submission for the Pre-Budget Consultations in Advance of the Upcoming Federal Budget
By the COSCO and the National Pensioners Federation**

Recommendations

We recommend that:

- 1: The government of Canada immediately develop national principles and regulations grounded in national and international human rights legislation to protect the human rights of seniors living in long-term care homes in Canada;
2. The government of Canada act immediately to prevent more unexpected deaths of seniors in long term care from a second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic;
3. The government of Canada allocate in the upcoming Budget double the level of funding for long term care from 1.3 per cent of GDP (2017) to the level of other OECD countries such as the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, and Belgium;
- 4: The government of Canada develop, as a matter of urgency, ethical principles and standards for the delivery of long term care to the minority of seniors (1. 2%) now in long term care across Canada;
5. The government of Canada develop accountability measures based on a national reporting system for monitoring seniors' care in long term care and rigorous accountability measures for all federally-funded spending on long term care;
6. The government of Canada include long term care in the Canada Health Act;
7. The government of Canada develop national measures for monitoring the mental and physical well-being of all seniors in public and private long term care facilities across Canada;
8. The government of Canada restrict, monitor and ultimately block the use of public funds for privately owned and operated for-profit long term care facilities;
9. That the government of Canada establish criteria that protect the human right of dying long term care residents to have compassionate care and a family member present during a public health crisis;
10. The government of Canada ensure that national standards are implemented that reflect the importance of the work and value of employees in long term care and that ensures that their human rights are respected so that the quality of life of both seniors and staff in long term care is greatly improved.

Background

“Older people have the same rights to life and health as everyone else.”
Antonio Guterres, UN Secretary-General, 2020



The National Pensioners Federation (NPF) which represents over 1,000,000 seniors across Canada thanks the Government of Canada for this opportunity to speak to you from the perspective of seniors about the desperate need for a fundamental transformation in the way that long term care is funded, regulated, operated, and practiced across Canada.

The spectre of a second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic later this year underscores the urgent need for the Canadian government to act now to prevent any more unexpected deaths in long term care.

We have long expressed our concerns to our governments, as have many others, about the historical and ongoing dehumanization of seniors in long term care without seeing any discernible change.

Surely the fact that over 80 percent of all deaths from COVID-19 in Canada, double the OECD average¹ as a proportion of the population, is of institutionalized seniors in long term care is a wake-up call for our governments? Besides, the appalling conditions in long-term care homes that were exacerbated by but predate the pandemic are being publicly exposed and can no longer be ignored.

Canada is deeply implicated in these deaths. Long term care has long been seriously underfunded in Canada and at 1.3 per cent of GDP (2017), Canada's funding is below the average of 15 other OECD countries and far below the level of some OECD countries such as the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, and Belgium.²

Yet Statistics Canada data from the 2016 Census indicate that the number of seniors age 65 and over in long term care is only 1.2 per cent of all seniors over 65 years.³ And they may not be a cost to the public purse for long. Some estimates of what is euphemistically termed average "length of stay," vary from about 18 months to about 2.5 years. Seniors in long term are also twice as likely as men to be women over the age of 85.⁴ Since many senior women living on their own have incomes below the poverty line, it is likely that spending the last few months of their lives in long term care was not a free choice.

Quality of Care

The BC Seniors' Advocate has provided two successive BC governments with reports documenting the deplorable state of long-term care in BC. Ground-breaking research from her office shows that about a quarter of residents are now administered anti-psychotic drugs with no diagnosis of psychosis, that about half say they don't want to be there, that many are depressed, many are sedated and that they are sometimes crowded two, three or four to a room.⁵ What does that say about the quality of care that we offer to our citizens in the final days of their lives?

¹ www.cihi.ca > new-analysis-paints-international-picture

² oecd.org/els/health-systems/long-term-care.html

³ www150.statcan.gc.ca. *Age and sex and type of dwelling data: key findings from the 2016 Census*

⁴ www150.statcan.gc.ca. *Distribution of the population by age 65 and over, by age group and sex, Canada, Jul1, 2015.*

⁵ Office of the BC Seniors Advocate (September, 2017). *Every Voice Counts: Residential Care Survey Results.*

The federal government must now develop measures for monitoring the mental and physical health of seniors in long term care, keep a national data base of these measures, and recognize the crucial role that family members play in supporting and monitoring the well-being of seniors in long term care.

Seniors' Human Rights

We understand that that the ongoing neglect and the many deaths of seniors in long term care across Canada represent a violation of their basic human rights and are contrary to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and several UN Human Rights Conventions.

We see the recent tragic deaths of seniors in long term care as the result of:

- Deeply-entrenched ageism, sexism, and inequality in Canadian society that undermine the dignity and worth of all human beings;
- The chronic underfunding of the health care of seniors and other vulnerable human beings;
- Short-sighted government leadership;
- The view of some that seniors in long term care are commodities that can be exploited for profit.

We are now reaping the consequences of these discriminatory policies and practices and we have to acknowledge that we are still perpetuating discrimination by allowing so many institutionalized seniors to be left to die alone, completely isolated and often in miserable conditions for many months by order of public health authorities. These practices have created inhumane conditions and are a violation of their human rights and may have resulted in many more deaths than would otherwise have occurred. Canada needs to evaluate all public health guidelines currently based on utilitarian concepts of the greatest good for the greatest number that can discriminate against the human rights of vulnerable populations such as seniors and cause them great harm.

Medical ethical guidelines may also be quite unethical in practice, unknown to the public in general, but used in decision-making concerning access to needed medical care.

In times of crisis, these combined approaches can discriminate against seniors on the basis of age and against others whose lives are not as highly valued as they should be in any democratic, egalitarian society.

Privatization

The institutionalization of seniors in large long-term care homes continues to be normalized and is a deeply entrenched practice in North America. These institutions even when, or even because, the beds are publicly funded have come to be regarded internationally as a very lucrative market for investors. Canadian governments have colluded in this practice.

To maximize profits for investors, home support workers, who are mostly women and often recent immigrants, are poorly paid and are given few consecutive hours of work so they have to work in multiple residences as well as several private homes to make a barely tolerable wage. In the wake of the current

pandemic, frantic efforts to supplement the pay of home support care providers and to take measures to protect their health and safety are being introduced.⁶

Include Long Term Care in the Canada Health Act

We seniors strongly believe that quality health care for seniors regardless of income level and wherever they live needs to be an essential component of our national health care system and equally available, whether in long-term care or not, everywhere in Canada.

Legislation, regulations, standards of care, monitoring and inspection of long term care homes varies greatly across Canada and, as COVID - 19 has made very clear, resulted too often in mistreatment and the more than 80 percent of all deaths from COVID-19 in Canada. However inexact current international statistics on deaths on long term care may be, that the proportion of deaths in long term care in Canada are so much greater than in most other OECD countries shames Canada.

It makes no sense to us that the provision of health care to the 1.2 per cent of senior Canadian citizens in long term care should not be part of the Canada Health Act and supported by its principles of universality, comprehensiveness, portability, accessibility and public administration with long-term predictable funding in much the same way as hospitals and primary care are supported.

Long Term Care Employees

Recent research and briefs to government from academics and labour unions have focused on the ruthless exploitation of care aids and other support staff, mainly women from ethno-cultural communities, working in long term care.⁷ As privatization and international trading of seniors care homes has increased, disregarded or even encouraged by governments, their work has long been undervalued.

Their labour is vital to the well-being of the seniors they care for but, like seniors themselves, their lives are not highly valued and their human rights are ignored.

Conclusion

We are, therefore, calling for a complete reform of long-term care provision in Canada and, as a matter of urgency, the development of national standards in long term care with federal funding to support their immediate implementation before more seniors in long term care fall victim to another wave of COVID-19.

This brief is co-authored by The Council of Senior Citizens of BC (COSCO BC) and The National Pensioners Federation (NPF).

⁶ The government of BC introduced measures to improve the safety and wages of care aides in long term care.

⁷ Pat Armstrong et al. (2020). *Restoring Trust: COVID-19 and The Future of Long Term Care*. rsc-src.ca
Canadian Labour Congress (my, 2020). *Lessons from a Pandemic: Union Recommendations for Transforming Long-Term Care in Canada*.

canadianlabour.ca