

Long-term care accounting for most COVID-19 deaths

As the vast majority of COVID-19 deaths in Ontario are taking place at long-term care facilities, the importance of protecting the province's most vulnerable has been the government's focus.

Of Ontario's roughly 1,700 deaths, a whopping 1,250 have come from outbreaks in long-term care homes. This accounts for about three quarters of COVID-19 deaths in the province.

Fortunately, Simcoe Manor has successfully kept the novel coronavirus out of its facilities thus far and New Tecumseth as a whole only has 12 active cases, while 17 have recovered and one person has died.

"Long-term care has been hit the hardest across the nation, in fact, internationally seniors are the most susceptible to COVID and in long-term care they are the most frail," said Simcoe County Health and Emergency Services General Manager Jane Sinclair.

In addition to a higher case fatality rate when infected, it's been a difficult time for seniors who are nearing the end of their life, as all non-essential visitation has been shut down.

"We work very closely with the families, we will permit them to come in and visit, but only immediate family unless we have a resident who's next of kin is, say, a grandson or a granddaughter," Sinclair explained. "It's under really strict provisions."

They allow just one visitor at a time, equipped with a gown, gloves, face masks, and eye protection, for a maximum of one hour.

"It's not business as normal because typically we really cherish and we really support families being there 24/7 in those [end of life] scenarios, so it's been really a challenge, but I have to say the technology has helped," Sinclair noted.

Through FaceTime, Skype, Zoom, and other video chat applications, Simcoe Manor staff have kept residents in contact with family and friends.

"That's been a real blessing in the situations where someone's at end of life," Sinclair said.

As well, the community as a whole has really stepped up to show support for Simcoe Manor residents and staff during this difficult time.

As of late, homemade signs with messages reading "we love you mom" or "thank you for protecting our loved ones" have lined the windows of the long-term care home, said Sinclair.

"That support, it's hard to describe just how helpful it is for our residents and for our staff," she said.

"We've seen people rise through this situation and are just doing the most caring things during these tough times."

Sinclair said Simcoe Manor's staff have went above and beyond to protect residents and brighten their days during the COVID-19 crisis.

"They are tremendous, they are our everyday heroes as far as we're concerned," she said. "They have been working with all these additional precautions and working overtime and have stepped up incredibly."

"They treat our residents like their family - they really do. They're amazing people and we wouldn't have seen the success that we've had to date, in keeping COVID out, without our staff," Sinclair added.

Going forward, she told The Times that keeping up their diligence, even as COVID-19 numbers begin to decline is key.

"I've heard the federal Chief Medical Officer of Health talk about how we're starting to get on the other side of the mountain, so we are starting to see some positive changes when it comes to COVID, but we can't let our guard down, not for one second," she remarked.

"Even though it's tough for everybody, we have to maintain our diligence until we're really confident the risks aren't there," Sinclair added.

"We'll continue to work closely with public health and our provincial government to manage the situation until we're out of it."

Meanwhile, the demand for long-term care in New Tecumseth and surrounding communities, outweighs what's available, so a roughly \$140 million expansion is being planned at Simcoe Manor.

Sinclair said work to the project is continuing behind the scenes to keep it on track during the pandemic.

An application for the expansion was submitted to the provincial government earlier this year and is currently awaiting approval.

"We haven't heard as of yet, but is in the queue, and we do continue to reach out to the province to see how things are moving along," Sinclair noted.

Work to the project continues to be done virtually, as the County of Simcoe works with their consultants on the projects design and necessary features.

"We're still moving ahead behind the scenes to continue to make that a reality," said Sinclair.

By Sam Odrowski Local Journalism Initiative Reporter