

## **COVID-19 has taught us seniors need to be a priority**

Knowing that Manitoba accounts for just one of the approximately 6,000 COVID-19 deaths in personal care homes in Canada, you'd be forgiven for thinking we place a higher priority on senior care than do people in other provinces. The owners of 29 of Manitoba's non-profit personal care homes would like to correct that mistaken impression.

These owners have the first-hand experience to know the people who live in long-term care are not high on the priority list of most Manitobans nor the provincial government.

If these seniors were a priority, would provincial funding for basic operations have been frozen for 10 years?

The average resident in a personal care home today is not the same as the average resident 20 or 30 years ago. Years ago, many residents were relatively healthy, independent, and ambulatory. Today, the majority of residents in a Manitoba personal care home are over 85 years old and have acute and complex healthcare challenges, including dementia. While it costs more to care for these high-needs residents, most personal care homes in Manitoba—and all our homes in Winnipeg—have received no increase in their operating budget for more than 10 years. This at a time when dietary expenses at homes have increased by 36 percent and nursing supplies and incontinent supplies have increased 50 percent.

Clearly, something's got to give. So managers of these homes are forced to take money away from things like social and recreational programs that help provide the quality of life residents deserve, and from things like maintenance, housekeeping and ancillary services in order to pay the grocery bill.

If seniors in care were a priority, wouldn't the government allow more time for nurses and aides to meet the increasingly complex needs of personal care home residents?

The higher needs of today's residents mean they need more help with things like getting dressed, bathing, brushing their teeth, using the bathroom and eating. Many require two-person assistance and greater supervision. Experts say at least 4.1 hours of care are required per resident per day, but the province provides funding for only 3.6 hours—a number that has not changed since 2009. This means assistance is not always available when residents need it. As well, bureaucratic regulations mean nurses are having to spend more and more time filling out paperwork, leaving less time for them at the bedside to provide and oversee resident care.

If seniors' living conditions were a priority, would government have frozen funds for capital repairs and improvements for 25 years?

It's not just Ontario and Quebec that have antiquated, multi-bed facilities that make infection control difficult. There are also personal care homes in Manitoba that are over 40 years old and have multiple beds per room. In the non-profit sector, our homes need an average \$6 million in

upgrades per home. Owners need to repair leaking roofs, replace faulty boilers and make long overdue renovations. Yet provincial money for repairs was basically frozen for a quarter century, even though inflation over those years was 57 percent. As a result, the only repairs made at most personal care homes have been those required by new fire and building codes—and new money finally announced by government last month can be used only for further fire safety upgrades. Those upgrades are important but they won't fix crumbling infrastructure.

To make matters worse, it typically takes 10 to 12 years for the province to approve a capital expense. So personal care home managers often give up in frustration and try instead to raise the needed funds from community members. We have often been successful, but of course community groups and members eventually get tapped out and so the next upgrade that would improve resident care and quality of life simply doesn't happen.

With more than 100 years of experience caring for seniors in our communities, the owners of community-based, non-profit homes want to work as partners with government to jointly find solutions to the long-term problems of under-funding, inadequate staffing, and unsuitable policies and regulations.

Most of all, we want the provincial government to significantly increase funding to our personal care homes to allow us to provide safe, appropriate care to our residents. At minimum, we must receive annual increases equal to the cost of inflation for both operating and capital expenses.

We hope Manitobans who care about their elderly relatives and friends will join us in telling government that chronic under-funding of personal care homes is not compatible with excellent care. And that the COVID-19 nightmare in other provinces has reinforced that it's high time seniors moved up a few pegs on everyone's priority list.

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