At the end of July, the Ontario government quietly released a study on staffing in long-term care. The government-initiated report recognizes “the critical importance of staffing in long-term care homes” and says the government must “urgently address the staffing crisis in long-term care, make long-term care homes a better place to live and work, and implement staffing approaches that reflect and respond to the complexity of the sector and diverse resident needs.”

The study was produced in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which to date has led to the deaths of more than 1,800 seniors in long-term care homes in Ontario and more than 9,000 across Canada, according to data compiled by independent journalist Nora Loreto.

COVID-19 outbreaks in long-term care homes continue to this day across the country.

Earlier this year, the Council of Canadians launched a campaign to raise awareness and build support for the crucial changes needed in long-term care homes across the country as part of our ongoing campaign for strengthened public health care. We called for immediate and urgent action, including for the federal government to work with national and territorial governments on a national strategy that includes national standards of care, eliminating the for-profit motives in long-term care and bringing homes into public hands under the same principles as the Canada Health Act, and providing the resources and support that workers in long-term care homes need.

Canada’s shameful record of COVID fatalities in long-term care is the highest of all developed country in the world. A report by the Canadian Institute of Health Information found that “the proportion of deaths occurring in long-term care (LTC) is double the OECD average.” It is a national tragedy that cannot be ignored, especially as the threat of more COVID-19 infections looms.

GOVERNMENTS SHOULD LISTEN TO WORKERS
Long-term care workers across the country have cited staffing shortages as a key contributor to the high number of deaths in long-term care homes – the staffing crisis was identified long before COVID-19 emerged in Canada, particularly in Ontario. What is happening in Ontario provides an example of why we need a coordinated national strategy on long-term care.

Workers in long-term care homes have unique insights on what is needed to avoid additional tragedies. Governments should be listening to their experiences closely – not to the managers or the corporate faces representing the homes – but to the people who work and provide care in the homes. (And whenever possible, they should listen to the people who live in them too).
With so many lives lost and more in the balance as the second wave of COVID-19 hits, the health and safety of residents and workers in long-term care should be a top priority issue for all provincial and territorial governments. Shockingly, in Ontario, it hasn’t been.

In late September, three unions – CUPE, SEIU and Unifor – representing long-term care workers, held a press conference asking why the Ford government has failed to act on its own report on staffing in homes. Months passed since the report was issued, and to this day, the staffing crisis in many of Ontario’s long-term care homes continues.

Personal support workers (PSWs) at the press conference spoke of the stress of their jobs – stress that has been there for many years – of not having enough time to properly care for residents and constantly feeling rushed. Now they have the added fears of residents dying and of contracting COVID-19 themselves and infecting others, including their families at home. As a result, many are leaving these often part-time, precarious positions.

To control infection, measures such as frequent handwashing and changing personal protective equipment (if any was supplied) were added into their already impossible workloads. The workers spoke of the fear of reprisal from their employers for speaking out.

**TERRIFYING WORKING CONDITIONS**

Jen Cloutier, a PSW who works in a long-term care home in Windsor, fought back tears as she spoke about her working conditions.

“To work through the pandemic is terrifying... is exhausting... is emotional. And to go to work every day to see your residents dying? It’s a horrible way to work,” she said. “We were as little as three to four staff in a four-hour period. How do you keep residents alive with three to four staff when I’ve worked a 20-hour shift and I don’t even have time to get hydration or nutrition for myself? Mental breakdowns, depression, vomiting in cars and locker rooms happen daily in my (long-term care) home, and I’m sure in many other homes.”

A coalition of long-term care stakeholders wrote to Premier Ford, warning they were not equipped to handle a second wave of COVID-19. Since June, they have asked the province for help addressing the staffing shortages and infection prevention and control deficiencies in homes.

Thankfully, in September there was a glimmer of hope - and it came from the federal government.

In the throne speech, the Trudeau government acknowledged that “one of the greatest tragedies of this pandemic is the lives lost in long-term care homes. Elders deserve to be safe, respected, and live in dignity.”

The Trudeau government pledged to work with provinces and territories and to “explicitly penalize those who neglect seniors under their care, putting them in danger.”

Most importantly, it promised to “work with the provinces and territories to set new, national standards for long-term care so that seniors get the best support possible” and “will look at further targeted measures for personal support workers, who do an essential service helping the most vulnerable in our communities. Canada must better value their work and their contributions to our society.”

Those new national standards for long-term care should mean a minimum of four hours of care per resident. We also need a mechanism that removes the profit motives from long-term care, especially when studies show that people are more likely to contract COVID-19 and die from it in for-profit homes.

We must work together from coast-to-coast-to-coast to improve long-term care for everyone. This is a national crisis that needs our national attention. Now it’s up to all of us to hold the Trudeau government to its promises.

You can keep up the pressure on the federal government by signing the Council’s petition at canadians.org/action/long-term-care that calls on the federal government to bring long-term homes into public hands, provide a coordinated seniors’ care strategy to be implemented in all provinces and territories, and ensure all long-term care workers have all the support, tools and equipment they need to stay safe.

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