



Essential Visitors in Long-Term Care

January 2022

Background

The COVID-19 Omicron variant began spreading rapidly throughout Canada and around the world at the end of 2021. In an effort to further protect residents living in long-term care facilities against this highly transmissible variant, the BC government implemented additional restrictions to long-term care facilities. As of December 31, each resident is limited to one "essential" visitor. While limiting the number of outside visitors to the facility can help to slow the spread of the virus, ensuring that each long-term care resident has an essential visitor is fundamentally important in ensuring the overall health and wellbeing of residents.

Currently, essential visitors are defined as those who provide particular types of care including compassionate care, palliative care, end-of-life care, medical assistance in dying, assistance with disabilities, feeding, mobility, communication, and decision-making. Outside of these parameters, visitors are classified as social visitors which are not authorized as part of these latest restrictions.ⁱ While residents' family members, friends and other social relations regularly provide them with vital support such as personal care, emotional support and much more, under the current definitions they do not fall within the category of an essential visit and are therefore not permitted to visit residents at this time.ⁱⁱ This lack of visitors has the potential to have seriously negative impacts such as those we saw in the early days of COVID-19 when visitors were also restricted.ⁱⁱⁱ

It is important to note that not every resident in a long-term care facility has a designated essential visitor. In November 2020, when restrictions were previously put in place for long-term care facilities as a result of ongoing high COVID-19 transmission, the Office of the Seniors Advocate published the report [Staying Apart to Stay Safe: The Impact of Visit Restrictions on Long-Term Care and Assisted Living Survey](#) and identified that 52% of resident requests to designate an essential visitor were denied.^{iv} This is in part due to the case-by-case management of these types of requests at the facility level, as well as the lack of a provincial requirement for every resident to have an essential visitor. In addition to the number of resident requests that were denied, many residents do not or may not be able to submit a request for such a visitor for various reasons. Recent reports state that only approximately 26% of BC long-term care residents have an essential visitor, and thus as many as three-quarters of residents are not receiving in person support during this period.^v Anecdotally, family members have commented on the noticeable decline in the wellbeing of their loved ones.^{vi}

Many family members and other visitors supplement regular care for residents living in long-term care facilities. Now that they are temporarily unable to visit, this falls on the health care professionals employed within the facility to meet the gaps. Nurses and other health care professionals within long-term care facilities and across the health system are already stretched beyond capacity. According to the Office of the Seniors Advocate, long-term care facilities can expect to see staff absences of roughly 30% in the days to months ahead.^{vii} In addition to anxiety around potentially contracting the virus, nurses and health professionals face significant stress, short-staffing, and burnout in the midst of wave after wave of COVID-19 in addition to the 'normal' stressors and pressures of health care.

Granting agency to every resident in long-term care to designate an essential visitor is fundamental to ensuring that access to personal supports is prioritized during this time. While it is understandable that the over-arching protective measures that limit the number of visitors into long-term care facilities is necessary amidst the spread of the Omicron variant, these types of restrictions also cause other unintended negative effects. Enabling every resident in long-term care to have at least one essential visitor would help to complement the care being provided by heavily burdened nurses and other health workers, and would ensure that each resident receives essential face-to-face interaction and emotional support on a regular basis.

NNPBC recommends that the mental health and socio-emotional needs of residents be prioritized, and this includes regular contact with essential visitors. Further, nursing leadership structures in long-term care must be clearly established so that every nurse is clear on the chain of command and the routes for advocacy and expressions of concern, so that there are appropriate and effective mechanisms through which nurses can bring concerns forward. Moreover, those at the health care 'executive table' must truly appreciate that the issues



nurses raise are of fundamental importance to patient wellbeing. Our systems must allow for forceful advocacy for the conditions under which nursing can effectively play its role, including advocacy for an essential visitor for every resident.

Key Messages

- On December 31, 2021, the BC government placed additional restrictions on long-term care facilities by allowing only one essential visitor to visit each resident.
- While limiting the number of outside visitors is an understandable approach to preventing transmission, not every resident in a long-term care facility in BC has an essential visitor. According to recent reports, only about 26% of BC's long-term care residents have an essential visitor designated.
- Granting agency to every resident in long-term care to designate an essential visitor is fundamental to ensuring that equitable access to personal supports is prioritized during this time.
- NNPBC recommends that the mental health and socio-emotional needs of residents be re-prioritized, and this includes regular contact with essential visitors.
- Nursing leadership must be cultivated and fostered to allow for forceful advocacy for the conditions under which nursing can play its role effectively, such as advocating for an essential visitor for every resident.

Further Reading/Resources

- [BCCDC: Long-Term Care Facilities & Assisted Living: Temporary Changes to Visitor Guidance \(Jan 4, 2022\)](http://www.bccdc.ca/health-professionals/clinical-resources/covid-19-care/clinical-care/long-term-care-facilities-assisted-living)
- [Office of the Seniors Advocate: Every Resident in Long-Term Care is Entitled to a Designated Visitor](http://www.bccdc.ca/Health-Info-Site/Documents/Visitors_Long-Term_Care_Seniors_Assisted_Living.pdf)
- [Office of the Seniors Advocate: Staying Apart to Stay Safe – The Impact of Visit Restrictions on Long-Term Care & Assisted Living Survey \(Nov 2020\)](http://www.bccdc.ca/Health-Info-Site/Documents/Visitors_Long-Term_Care_Seniors_Assisted_Living.pdf)
- [NNPBC Issues Brief: 'Staying Apart to Stay Safe: The Impact of Visit Restrictions on Long-Term Care and Assisted Living Survey': A Nursing Response](http://www.bccdc.ca/Health-Info-Site/Documents/Visitors_Long-Term_Care_Seniors_Assisted_Living.pdf)

ⁱ BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC). 'Long-Term Care Facilities & Assisted Living: Temporary Changes to Visitor Guidance.' Jan 4, 2022. <http://www.bccdc.ca/health-professionals/clinical-resources/covid-19-care/clinical-care/long-term-care-facilities-assisted-living>;

BC Ministry of Health. 'Overview of Visitors in Long-Term Care and Seniors' Assisted Living.' Oct 12, 2021. http://www.bccdc.ca/Health-Info-Site/Documents/Visitors_Long-Term_Care_Seniors_Assisted_Living.pdf

ⁱⁱ Office of the Seniors Advocate BC. 'Every Resident in Long-Term Care is Entitled to a Designated Visitor.' Jan 6, 2022. <https://www.seniorsadvocatebc.ca/app/uploads/sites/4/2022/01/January-6-OSA-NR-LTC-essential-visitors.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ [NNPBC Issues Summary: Canada's Long-term Care Crisis](http://www.bccdc.ca/Health-Info-Site/Documents/Visitors_Long-Term_Care_Seniors_Assisted_Living.pdf)

^{iv} Office of the Seniors Advocate BC. 'Every Resident in Long-Term Care is Entitled to a Designated Visitor.'

^v Brunoro, Michele. *CTV*. 'Skepticism as B.C. families promised more access to loved ones in long-term care.' Jan 4, 2022. <https://bc.ctvnews.ca/skepticism-as-b-c-families-promised-more-access-to-loved-ones-in-long-term-care-1.5727920>;

Cordasco, Lisa. *Vancouver Sun*. 'COVID-19: Seniors advocate, care home operators want restrictions eased to allow more visitors in long-term care.' Jan 4, 2022. <https://vancouversun.com/news/local-news/seniors-advocate-care-home-operators-want-restrictions-eased-to-allow-more-visitors-in-long-term-care>

^{vi} Brunoro, Michele. *CTV*. 'Skepticism as B.C. families promised more access to loved ones in long-term care.'

^{vii} Office of the Seniors Advocate BC. 'Every Resident in Long-Term Care is Entitled to a Designated Visitor.'