



"Staying Apart to Stay Safe: The Impact of Visit Restrictions on Long-Term Care and Assisted Living Survey": A Nursing Response

November 2020

Background

On November 3, 2020 Seniors Advocate, Isobel Mackenzie, released a report based on an August 2020 survey of long-term care and assisted living. Prior to the survey, the Office of the Seniors Advocate reported that COVID-19 and related visit restrictions in long-term and assisted living facilities generated more calls and email than any other issue since its inception in 2014. The five-week long survey included over 15,000 participants and generated roughly 13,000 responses from residents, family members, friends of residents and the general public. Overwhelmingly the survey indicated that while families and residents are supportive of COVID-19 safety measures, they also support longer and increased visits to residents of long-term and assisted living facilities.ⁱ

High level survey results revealed that prior to the pandemic the majority of families (55%) were visiting loved ones in facilities for an hour or more several times per week, with many visiting on a daily basis (the survey also includes a special section on spousal visits but for the purposes of this document, general results are highlighted). These pre-pandemic visits also often included essential care (grooming, personal care etc.). Since the pandemic, the majority of visits have dropped to once per week for 30 minutes or less and essential care on the part of visiting loved ones has ceased. Roughly one-third of visits have moved outside, 65% were observed by staff and 70% of those visiting indicated that they were unable to touch loved ones. Most visitors noted they followed hand washing and personal protective equipment use guidelines prior to seeing loved ones. While most family members and residents are supportive of pandemic restrictions, this same group believes that visits should be more frequent and that more than one visitor per resident should be allowed.ⁱⁱ

The report found that the majority of residents who responded, over 50%, were from assisted living and 43% of respondents were from long-term care. This trend reflects the likelihood that those in assisted living on average are better able to answer this type of survey without assistance. From a resident perspective, those who responded noted that they were using online tools to facilitate communication with loved ones (e.g. Zoom and Facetime) and were less likely to be concerned about becoming ill with COVID-19 than their family members who were quite concerned that the resident would become ill. Generally, the quality of care was rated as excellent or very good and overall long-term care residents wanted fewer restrictions than assisted living residents.ⁱⁱⁱ

The report concludes with three key areas to action:

- Residents should have the opportunity to identify an 'essential care partner' who can visit frequently and provide supports that are essential to the mental and physical health of the resident.
- While essential care visitors are important, social visitors matter too. These social visitors must be balanced against the risk of COVID-19 with the health and happiness of the resident.
- Residents and family members must be embedded in all decisions on both long-term and assisted living so that their 'voices' may be heard in any policy decision.^{iv}

The challenges articulated by the report are complex and bely the difficulties of ensuring both the physical and mental well-being of residents in long-term care and assisted living are protected during a global pandemic. Nurses are critical members of both the long-term care and assisted living workforce and are fully aware of the importance of the public health interventions that have been implemented in order to stop the spread of COVID-19. Nurses have been at the forefront of care for long-term care and assisted living residents who have seen visits by family decrease while their mental and emotional needs remain complex. Because nurses are at the point of care in long-term and assisted living, they are acutely aware of the toll this pandemic has taken and the necessity of balancing the mental, emotional and social needs of both residents and their families. Nurses are therefore ideally positioned to provide expert advice, and to work with the Office of the Seniors Advocate to champion the needed changes within this sector of the health care system.



Nurses are at the centre of complex care from a holistic perspective on a daily basis. They interpret best available evidence, and balance it with a relational understanding of individual human needs. It is that expert, informed and balanced perspective that will help us find creative and meaningful solutions to the very real challenges the COVID-19 pandemic creates for those who are served by the assisted living and long-term care sectors. Nursing knows that quality of life is much more than simply protection from disease. Although balancing happiness with protection from the impacts of COVID-19 will not be easy, from a nursing perspective there are always possibilities to be found.

Key Messages.

- NNPBC thanks the Office of the Seniors Advocate for its detailed and fulsome report which highlights clearly that while physical health during the pandemic is paramount, the emotional and social needs of residents should also not be denied.
- NNPBC recommends that the mental health and socio-emotional needs of residents be considered equally with physical health and safety.
- Nurses are well positioned both at point of care and in leadership roles to help implement the recommendations from the report of the Office of the Seniors Advocate.
- NNPBC understands that strong public health measures were put into place to protect those in long term care and assisted living. While these measures were necessary, we have learned more about COVID-19 and recognize that balancing health and happiness is critical.

Further Reading/Resources

- [Office of the Seniors Advocate. Staying Apart to Save Lives, full report](#)
- [News Release: Visits to Long-Term Care Must Balance Health Risks with Quality of Life B.C. Seniors Advocate Releases Results of Province-wide Survey](#)
- [Office of the Seniors Advocate. Staying Apart to Save Lives. Survey results](#)
- [NNPBC Issues Summary: Long Term Care and COVID-19](#)

Please feel free to direct questions and additional comments to info@nnpbc.com.

ⁱ [Staying Apart to Stay Safe: The Impact of Visit Restrictions on Long-Term Care and Assisted Living Survey. Report Summary. Accessed November 2020.](#)

ⁱⁱ [Office of the Seniors Advocate. Staying Apart to Save Lives. Survey results](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ [Office of the Seniors Advocate. Staying Apart to Save Lives, full report](#)

^{iv} [Office of the Seniors Advocate. Staying Apart to Save Lives, full report](#)