

Let the Long-Term Care COVID-19 Commission's work continue

By Vicki McKenna, RN

As the second wave of COVID-19 continues to sweep across the province and destroy the health and lives of vulnerable residents in our long-term care homes, Ontario Minister of Long-Term Care Merrilee Fullerton has rejected a request for an extension from a commission investigating why the outbreaks have been so severe and how to stop them.

As the union representing registered nurses and health-care professionals in many long-term care homes, the Ontario Nurses' Association (ONA) notes that little has changed since the first wave of the pandemic, despite assurances from the provincial government that it will put an "iron ring" of protection around vulnerable residents.

ONA is one of many organizations providing information and recommendations to the Long-Term Care COVID-19 Commission – the latest in a long list of inquiries in which ONA has participated.

Front-line RNs care deeply about the residents of long-term care. They are also highly skilled professionals with invaluable expertise. Registered nurses provide care each and every day to residents on the front line of this pandemic. Their voices are the key to understanding how to prevent the spread of COVID-19. As their voice, ONA has been advocating for improved care for these residents for decades.

The commission, headed by Justice Frank Marrocco, has made great progress. Alarmed at what it is hearing from those who work in long-term care and others, it has already written and released two interim reports to guide this government to stem outbreaks and deaths in these facilities. Why hasn't the government acted to implement the recommendations made to date?

ONA is appalled that the minister has rejected the commission's request for an extension to complete its work while simultaneously failing to produce all the documents needed for the commission to do its work. It is clear that the commission has completed extensive work to date; however, with the second wave underway and the volumes of information that the commission continues to receive, there is much more work to be done to ensure a fulsome report and recommendations. While the minister and her cabinet colleagues, as well as the premier, continue to say they want to fix the longstanding issues in long-term care, their actions do not reflect this.

As more residents and staff become infected and die, there is no doubt that long-term care residents, their families and friends must be wondering when enough will be enough.

ONA has a suggestion. Approve the commission's request for an extension, provide the critical information it needs to get to the bottom of what happened, and act now on the interim recommendations already made. The commission should be allowed to carry on with its investigative work and continue to release interim reports until it is able to deliver a comprehensive and thorough final report.

If this minister is committed to the 'urgency' to fix long-term care, as she says she is, there is no reason for her not to allow the work to continue and move immediately to put that iron ring and common-sense changes into place now.

Vicki McKenna, RN, is president of the Ontario Nurses' Association.