

Challenges Facing Canadian Long-Term Care Homes and Retirement Homes During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Summary

We explored how leaders in Ontario's long-term care homes (LTCH) and retirement homes (RH) experienced and managed the COVID-19 pandemic. From February 2021 to July 2022, we interviewed 91 leaders across 47 homes in Ontario. Leaders told us about their ongoing challenges with infection prevention and control (IPAC), vaccine update, and staff well-being and mental health. These issues appeared early in the pandemic but continued to change and persist more than a year later. However, the supports available to homes did not keep pace with these evolving needs.

Implications

Our study shows that the COVID-19 pandemic made existing problems in LTCH and RH more visible. Even with some government support, homes continued to face big challenges. These included putting IPAC measures into practice, encouraging staff and residents to get vaccinated, and supporting staff well-being. Strategies at different levels are needed to support staff with these complex challenges.

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What is the current situation?

- The COVID-19 pandemic made existing problems in long-term care homes (LTCH) and retirement homes (RH) worse and created new crises.
- This study explored the challenges homes faced and strategies they used, with the goal of designing a support program for the pandemic and beyond.

What did we do?

- We conducted 91 needs assessment interviews with leaders across 47 Ontario homes between February 2021 and July 2022.
- Our team worked with a study steering committee made up of experts from different fields to design an interview guide. We asked home leaders about their pandemic experiences, the main challenges their home was facing, and any strategies available to them.
- We used a rapid analysis method to review the interview data. First, we created a coding guide by having two researchers independently code the data. Then we grouped the codes into themes to help us interpret the findings.

What were the results?

- COVID-19 challenges continued to persist and evolve over a year into the pandemic, and the available supports did not meet homes' needs.
- IPAC was hard to manage because of limited resources and staff capacity. Leaders also struggled to explain changing COVID-19 restrictions and policies to residents' families and caregivers, which caused more worry, confusion, and frustration.
- Leaders faced difficulties with COVID-19 vaccine uptake, particularly among staff. Some staff had vaccine safety concerns, while others had trouble accessing vaccine clinics or reliable information.
- The pandemic negatively impacted the mental health and well-being of staff, and this was consistently identified as one of the biggest challenges facing home leaders. Limited access to supports and concerns about stigma and privacy discouraged staff from using available support programs (e.g., employee assistance programs).
- Homes responded by working with hospitals, relying on strong leadership, supporting IPAC and vaccine champions, among other strategies.

What does this mean for future pandemic planning?

- There remains a need for strategies at different levels to support LTCH and RH staff in preparation for future public health crises. Our team used these data to develop the [Wellness Hub Program](#).