

Manitoba to build outdoor shelters for personal care home visits

Indoor visits by designated caregivers will be allowed starting Tuesday

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The Manitoba government wants to build outdoor shelters to allow families to visit their loved ones in personal care homes beyond the summer months. (Ryan Remiorz/The Canadian Press)

The Manitoba government plans to build outdoor, all-season shelters at personal care homes to allow residents to safely visit their loved ones during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The province will also allow limited indoor visits by designated caregivers with certain precautions in place starting Tuesday, Health Minister Cameron Friesen announced Monday.

While care home residents are most at risk of serious outcomes from COVID-19, it's essential to their well-being that they stay connected to their loved ones, Friesen said.

"Health is bigger than just the physical health — it's the emotional ties, and it's the mental stimulation," said Lanette Siragusa, chief nursing officer of Manitoba Shared Health, during Monday's COVID-19 briefing.

"I know the PCHs, the staff have been doing their very best to take the place of the visitors and they care very well for those residents," Siragusa said. "But the ability to just be connected with your loved ones, it's just going to be an uplifting experience that has been long anticipated and it's time for that to happen."

Friesen noted that close to 80 per cent of deaths related to COVID-19 have involved people living in personal care homes, and that the province has managed to avoid the outbreaks that have happened in other provinces like Quebec, which has experienced close to 4,600 COVID-19 related deaths in its long-term care facilities.



Manitoba Health Minister Cameron Friesen says personal care homes will get all-weather shelters for visits during the pandemic. (CBC)
Manitoba has recorded seven deaths from COVID-19.

The [fourth person to die from COVID-19](#) was a personal care home resident before he was hospitalized. The pandemic isn't expected to be over in fall or even by winter, so the province is trying to be proactive and come up with solutions, Friesen said.

The shelters will need to be accessible, protected from the elements, heated and easily cleaned, Friesen said. The province wants to have the shelters under construction by August so that they will be ready to use in fall, he said.

- [The long-term care crisis: How B.C. controlled COVID-19 while Ontario, Quebec face disaster](#)
- [Quebec coroner's office orders public inquiry into COVID-19 deaths in long-term care homes](#)

The director of an association representing care homes in the province said personal care homes will need to proceed with caution while hurrying to offer a more conducive environment for visiting.

Jan Legeros, the executive director of the Long-Term and Continuing Care Association of Manitoba, said allowing visitors indoors was the next logical step.

WATCH | Allowing indoor visits at personal care homes:



The province will allow limited indoor visits by designated caregivers at personal care homes starting Tuesday.

"I think it's really important for families to see their loved ones and be reassured that they're receiving the quality care that they would expect to, as well," she said.

As for outdoor shelters, Legeros said some of the 127 licensed personal care homes in the province simply won't be able to accommodate those structures, because they just don't have the physical space.

Social isolation is a terrible thing, and it can cause so much harm, not just psychological harm, but physiological harm. - *Long-Term and Continuing Care Association of Manitoba executive director Jan Legeros*

A recently formed working group will be creating a plan to provide direction to the government, Legeros said.

The advantages of keeping people outside means reduced risk of exposure indoors, although she does not have a picture in her mind of the ideal outdoor shelter.

"Social isolation is a terrible thing, and it can cause so much harm — not just psychological harm but physiological harm as well. So we really need to find a way to connect our seniors with their families in any creative way we can think of," she said.

In a statement, NDP health critic Uzoma Asagwara said the province must do more to keep long-term care facilities safe by hiring more staff to manage intense pressure and guarantee a minimum standard of care.

Outdoor visits beyond summer

The province began allowing outdoor visits at personal care homes last month.

The indoor visits won't be "business as usual," Friesen said. They will only be for designated caregivers, who will have to wear masks and be screened before they can enter care homes.

Shared Health has also developed refresher courses for personal protective equipment, and ensured that PCHs have their outbreak protocols and screening questions up to date. The one-site staffing model in place for PCH workers, which ensures they don't potentially circulate COVID-19 to multiple facilities, is also being evaluated, said Siragusa.

The plan is to allow them throughout the summer until the fall, when flu season usually arrives and the risk of seniors getting sick is greater, he said.

WATCH | 'There is some risk': Health minister announces care home visits can resume



Manitoba Health Minister Cameron Friesen announced that loved ones will be able to visit their family members in personal care homes starting Tuesday. Visits will be limited, and visitors will be screened and must wear non-medical masks.

"There is some risk. We believe it is a calculated risk but we believe it's a balanced risk — one that weighs the need to keep personal care home residents safe but also takes into consideration what it is that Manitobans have been saying to us," he said.

But the province would like the outdoor visits to continue, he said.

"It is easier to accommodate an outdoor visit in June or July than it is in November or February, so that's part of our thinking," he said.

During the COVID-19 briefing, Siragusa noted that Manitoba has been "really lucky" because it is "one of the few provinces that hasn't had a PCH outbreak."

"Anything we can do to negate that risk, we want to do that," she said.