



Health Minister Cameron Friesen

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EDITORIAL

Underfunding pre-empts care home visits

PREMIER Brian Pallister didn't have much trouble in May coming up with \$45 million so every Manitoba senior, regardless of income level, would get a \$200 cheque to help cover extra costs related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Those controversial cheques were accompanied by a personal thank-you letter from the premier, prompting some critics to accuse Mr. Pallister of campaigning on the taxpayers' dime.

But it's a different story when it comes to the province finding money for struggling personal care homes, which complained last week they haven't had any funding increase for basic operations in more than 10 years.

Two organizations — Manitoba Association of Residential & Community Care Homes for the Elderly (MARCHE) and Long Term & Continuing Care Association of Manitoba (LTCAM) — stated Manitoba care homes are chronically underfunded, understaffed and in dire need of government help.

They said one of the tragic consequences of a 10-year funding freeze is that, despite the recent easing of restrictions on visits to personal-care homes, staffing shortages continue to make it difficult for family members to spend time with isolated loved ones.

It's difficult to argue family visits are being

"allowed" when the resources necessary to make those visits possible are not in place.

Leesa Streifler told reporters this week that, despite the loosening of pandemic rules, the Winnipeg care home in which her mother lives can only allow her two short visits per week because the province hasn't provided extra funding to hire staff at a time when care-home personnel can only work at one facility, and many regular workers are on summer vacation.

"It is a sad reality that personal care homes in this province are underfunded and struggling with insufficient numbers of staff," Ms. Streifler said. "With the extra cost to supply (personal protective equipment) to staff and supervising (COVID-19) pandemic protocols for visits, family visits have added to the already overburdened personal care homes.

"The real victims in this situation are the elderly, who have been stressed, confused and isolated, resulting in declining physical and emotional health."

Laurie Cerquetti, CEO of the Saul and Claribel Simkin Centre in Winnipeg, said she sympathizes with families who would like to visit loved ones more often, but the process is labour-intensive due to added public health measures amid the pandemic. Staff must prebook visits, screen guests, move

seniors to and from visitation areas, supervise the sessions and sanitize areas between visits.

MARCHE and LTCAM are pressing the province for increased funding for a wide array of needs, including repairs and upgrades to aging facilities, and to help with soaring expenses and the added labour of co-ordinating family visits during a health crisis with no real end in sight.

In an emailed statement, Health Minister Cameron Friesen simply pointed to \$280 million in funding the province announced in June for safety upgrades to ensure care homes comply with fire code requirements.

The minister called on all long-term care providers and their associations to work with regional health authorities and families "to do everything possible to increase visits at this time."

In May, Mr. Pallister defended his controversial cheque mail-out and thank-you letters as a way "to show support, affection — quite frankly — and respect for seniors."

If that truly is the premier's goal, a far better way to show gratitude and respect for seniors during this pandemic would be to quickly arrange the funding desperately required for cash-strapped care homes to arrange meaningful family visits for the province's most vulnerable population.