

Restarting the Economy: What workers in the long-term care sector need to know

Revised July 13, 2020

Long-term care workers have faced an extremely challenging time during the pandemic. Before COVID-19, Unifor and others had consistently raised the issues of understaffing, problematic working conditions, low compensation for workers and the lack of an enforceable direct care standard for residents.

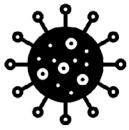
Unfortunately, it has taken a pandemic and hundreds of outbreaks—leading to many infections and deaths—in long-term care homes to bring these core issues to light more broadly in the media and public eye. In Ontario, at least eight PSW's have died of COVID-19, highlighting the need for PPE for those who provide the most personal of care. The challenges facing the sector have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Meanwhile, long-term care workers and residents have been especially at risk of their health and well-being throughout this time.

Unlike many other sectors, the long-term care sector has not seen a slow-down or shutdown of operations. Additional precautions, safety measures and care have been required during the pandemic, meaning staffing demands have been higher than ever. Due to the pre-existing staffing crisis in long-term care, the sector as a whole has not been able to respond to the crisis on its own. Workers from other health care sectors and even the Canadian military have been re-deployed throughout the crisis to work in long-term care homes.

Adding to this, many long-term care workers have been unable to work because of lack of childcare or because they, or a close family member are immune-compromised. This means that the remaining workers are working overtime and are being denied vacation, sometimes under emergency orders. It is clear that the entire system is ripe for a complete breakdown.

What long-term care workers can expect at work

Even as various jurisdictions move through the various stages of re-opening, the situation in long-term care homes will not dramatically change. Strict protocols, widespread testing, outbreak control and increased staffing requirements will likely not change much in the immediate future.



As long as there is no vaccine and COVID-19 exists in the community, long-term care homes will have to remain vigilant in preventing outbreaks. Residents will remain particularly susceptible and workers will remain at risk given their role in caring for residents.

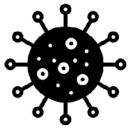
Ontario and Nova Scotia (along with other provinces in partnership with the federal government) have introduced “pandemic pay” for health care workers. However, Nova Scotia’s lump-sum payment will be paid out in July as a one-time bonus, while Ontario’s \$4 per hour premium and monthly lump sum payment are slated to end in mid-August.

What long-term care workers should expect from their Employers

Employers have a responsibility and obligation to ensure that workers’ health and safety are protected in the workplace.

The union should expect employers to provide with the following:

- Leading all decisions and actions with the notion of the “precautionary principle”
- Working with the JHSC or health and safety representative on hazard assessments and preventative measures
- Ensuring that all workers have proper access to personal protective equipment (PPE).
- Ensuring that workers are properly trained and provided accessible information on COVID-19 related hazards, hygienic practices, sanitization, proper PPE use, etc.
- Regularly communicating with workers about expectations related to preventative measures, testing, and health and safety practices on site.
- Ensuring that staffing levels are adequate in order to provide proper care for residents, while maintaining the health and safety of workers and residents.
- Ensuring that all government directives related to long-term care homes are followed.
- Ensuring that the government-funded pandemic pay premium and/or lump sum is paid to employees in a timely manner.
- Ensuring that alternative housing is provided for workers who do not want to put their families at risk.
- Ensuring workers are not negatively affected for any and all absences due to child, elder and other dependent care needs resulting from the ongoing pandemic.



What long-term care workers need from Government

In addition to their role in the pandemic response and re-opening of the economy, provincial governments play an important role in the funding and operations of post-secondary institutions, while the federal government can implement various supportive measures.

The union has a number of policy demands for governments:

- The provinces should continue the pandemic pay for the duration of the crisis.
- The provinces should transition the pandemic pay into establishing enhanced provincial wage standards for long-term care workers.
- The provinces, in partnership with the federal government, should provide funding and establish minimum standards of daily care (including staff to resident ratios) that are clear and enforceable.
- The provinces must address the staffing shortages in the sector through funding, enhanced wage standards and mandatory minimum care standards.
- The provinces should begin the phase-out of for-profit long-term care homes and transition toward community-based, publicly-owned or non-profit homes.
- The province must carefully monitor outbreaks in long-term care, and take over administration quickly when homes are unable to contain the spread.
- The provinces should establish 14 days paid sick days for all workers.
- The provinces must ensure that public transit and child care services remain accessible for all workers.

Additional Resources

Unifor has launched a hub for member information about the pandemic at unifor.org/COVID19 and encourages members to check the site regularly for updates.

Subscribe to Unilink, the union's weekly national newsletter at unifor.org/subscribe and download the Unifor mobile app on your smartphone.