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# Personal care homes in crisis

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The Long Term and Continuing Care Association of Manitoba estimates about 98 per cent of residents have received third-dose booster shots.

More than 35 per cent of Winnipeg's personal care homes are dealing with COVID-19 outbreaks amid a staffing crunch.

On Friday, 11 outbreaks were declared at care homes in Manitoba, and there are at least 14 active outbreaks among Winnipeg's 39 long-term facilities.

In this wave of transmission, staff are more likely than residents to be infected, with the Long Term and Continuing Care Association of Manitoba estimating about 98 per cent of residents have received third-dose booster shots.

"Thankfully, we're not seeing the kinds of infections in our residents that we did see in previous waves — it's primarily the staff," said Jan Legeros, association executive director.

The association is urging all staff to get their booster shots. "We're also encouraging staff to reduce their community contacts because, of course, we're seeing skyrocketing numbers."

Legeros said the association has worked with staff to educate them on how to keep residents properly hydrated and how to monitor for COVID-19 symptoms that may be specific to seniors.

The provincial pool personal care homes have pulled from in the past — including home care workers and redeployments from other areas of Manitoba — is exhausted, Legeros said.

Staff shortages have meant services are being temporarily cut back: many residents have sponge baths instead of thorough bathing and wear hospital gowns instead of staff dressing and undressing them daily.

Facilities increasingly rely on families to assist in care (fully vaccinated individuals who've been deemed a resident's designated caregiver).

The province has not mandated vaccinations for personal care home staff, and has not released vaccine uptake information for the sector.

That was a mistake, says Dr. Samir Sinha, director of geriatrics at Sinai Health and the University Health Network in Toronto.

New care home outbreaks could have been prevented with mandatory vaccination for staff and better investments in retaining and recruiting workers, he said Friday.

“This might just be the start of what we’re seeing across (Canada). Now, half of Ontario’s homes are in outbreak again; same thing in Quebec. What’s going to make Manitoba immune when they’ve done less to protect their homes in the first place by (not) requiring mandatory staff vaccinations?”

Sinha, who is from Winnipeg, has been tracking long-term care outbreaks and deaths across Canada since the COVID-19 pandemic began.

The death toll is more than 15,700 residents, he said, but several thousands died not because of the novel coronavirus directly, but because of the lack of care they received, leading to dehydration and starvation.

“What’s going to kill more older people during this wave, especially in our long-term care settings, is not actually going to be COVID itself. It’s going to actually be the isolation and it’s going to be the lack of care.”

Manitoba personal care homes are making use of monoclonal antibody treatment and anti-viral medication, Legeros said, adding staff know how important it is to monitor residents closely and keep them mobile, even if they are confined to their rooms.

“One of the things we’ve learned from previous waves,” she said, “is that we have to monitor the residents very, very carefully for any kind of symptoms.

“So if they’re in their rooms, that means we need to be in their rooms and we need to be monitoring them and making sure they’re doing OK.”