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December 24, 2021

MEMORANDUM TO: All Retirement Home Licensees

FROM: Jacqueline Cureton
Assistant Deputy Minister
Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility

SUBJECT: Supports Available for Retirement Homes

As you are all aware, Ontario is seeing a rising number of COVID cases with the rapid spread of the Omicron COVID-19 variant. I am writing today to provide updates on a number of existing programs and services and to share information on new supports that are available to assist the sector.

Test to Work

As Omicron becomes the dominant strain of COVID-19 circulating within communities across Ontario, we recognize that an increasing number of retirement home staff will be at a heightened risk of exposure to COVID-19 infection.

To preserve and protect the necessary workforce, we are introducing Test to Work, for staff who have been exposed to COVID-19 but are not COVID-19 positive. This measure should only be applied by homes in critical staffing shortage situations:

- Any fully vaccinated staff that is a high-risk contact may return to work, after an initial negative PCR test, if they remain asymptomatic and if they complete the following and test negative on all tests:
 - PCR test as soon as possible and if negative (return to work after initial negative result)
 - Rapid antigen testing (RAT) daily for 10 days since last exposure to the case (staff can fully enter the home upon receiving a negative RAT result)

- Repeat testing on or after day 7 after last exposure to the case
- Any fully vaccinated staff with ongoing exposure to a case (e.g. staff lives in the same household as a case) may return to work from the date on which the household case became symptomatic (or from the date of the positive test), and the staff should complete the following testing:
 - PCR test on day 0 (return to work after initial negative result),
 - RAT daily while exposure is ongoing and daily for 10 days after last exposure (staff can fully enter the home upon receiving a negative RAT result)
 - PCR test on or after day 7, and on or after day 14/15.
- Any staff that is a high-risk contact and develops symptoms should isolate at home until they receive a negative PCR test and their symptoms are improving.

Vaccination Supports

Third Dose Recommendations

Vaccination continues to be the most effective tool in limiting the spread and severity of COVID-19. In this regard, on December 16, 2021 the Ministry of Health updated its recommendations for COVID-19 third doses, which can be [accessed at this link](#). In light of the highly transmissible Omicron variant, it is critical to encourage everyone living and working in a retirement home to receive a third dose/booster if they are able to.

Contacting Public Health Units to Independently Administer Vaccines

Retirement homes with the capacity to independently administer COVID-19 vaccines are encouraged to contact their local Public Health Unit (PHU) to set up operators where such capacity exists. You can identify your local PHU by [following this link](#).

GO-VAXX Mobile Clinics

A further support available is the GO-VAXX mobile vaccine clinic program, which provides a safe, reliable and convenient option for people to receive their COVID-19 vaccine. Please [follow this link](#) for more information.

Changes to Directive #3 for Long-Term Care Homes

On December 17, 2021, the Chief Medical Officer of Health issued a revised [Directive #3 for Long-Term Care Homes](#), which also applies to retirement homes (Directive #3). Directive #3 establishes revised requirements for infection prevention and control (IPAC) in retirement homes to ensure the health and safety of residents and staff during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To provide clarification and support for homes to implement Directive #3, the Retirement Home Regulatory Authority (RHRA) released an updated “Policy to Implement Directive #3”, which can be [accessed at this link](#).

Infection Prevention and Control (IPAC)

Further to the updates to Directive #3, I would like to reiterate that everyone entering a retirement home must follow strong IPAC practices. Operators should ensure that these practices are reviewed on a frequent basis through IPAC audits to confirm that best practices are in effect and improved, as needed. In this regard, Public Health Ontario (PHO) offers a self-assessment audit tool for long-term care and retirement homes, which can be [accessed at this link](#). PHO offers further supports for staff and administrators which can be [accessed at this link](#).

The Ontario government has developed local networks of IPAC expertise from across the health system - IPAC Hubs - which work to enhance IPAC practices in community based, congregate living settings, including retirement homes. If you have not already established a link to the IPAC Hub in your region or if you have general questions, please touch base with your regional Ontario Health (OH) contact:

- Western Ontario - Lesley Hirst - Lesley.Hirst@ontariohealth.ca
- Central Ontario - Mira Bako-Shannon - Mira.Backo-Shannon@ontariohealth.ca
- Greater Toronto Area - Rose Cook - Rose.Cook@ontariohealth.ca
- Northern Ontario - Megan Waque – Megan.Waque@ontariohealth.ca
- Eastern Ontario - James Fahey - James.Fahey@ontariohealth.ca

More information about IPAC Hubs can be [accessed at this link](#).

Rapid Antigen Testing and Directive #3

Directive #3 requires that anyone entering a retirement home must undergo rapid antigen testing. To this end, the Policy to Implement Directive #3 requires that retirement homes, as part of their vaccine policy, must implement a rapid testing process by December 22, 2021 if they have not done so already.

All licensed retirement homes are pre-approved to access rapid antigen tests from the Provincial Antigen Screening Program (PASP). More information about PASP and antigen screening in the retirement homes sector can be [accessed at this link](#).

Please note that Ontario is experiencing a temporary disruption to our regular rapid antigen supply schedule due to a global supply constraint.

As the Ministry of Health works to bring more supply online, they are also working with the Chief Medical Officer of Health to prioritize people and settings at highest risk for COVID-19 transmissions for the distribution of needed rapid antigen point-of-care tests, including retirement homes.

If you have experienced a delay in receiving tests, or if you received an order below the number of tests requested, be assured that MOH is working diligently to resolve temporary challenges with respect to shipments and supply capacity.

As of December 29, 2021, shipments to all priority sectors, including retirement homes, will be filled to 100% again instead of the reduced thresholds that were temporary implemented to address supply constraints.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and Directive #5

The Chief Medical Officer of Health issued an [updated Directive #5](#) that indicates effective December 22, 2021, as an interim additional precaution, all health care workers providing direct care to or interacting with a resident with suspected, probable or confirmed COVID-19 in a retirement home are required to wear a fit-tested, seal-checked N95 respirator (or approved equivalent), eye protection (goggles or face shield), gown and gloves. This recommendation is based on up-to-date evidence from Public Health Ontario, and application of the precautionary principle.

Fit Tested N95 respirators

Ontario continues to acquire fit tested N95 respirators, which are available from the provincial stockpile that can be accessed by health care organizations as well as retirement homes. Protocols for accessing supplies from the provincial or regional stockpiles, including the request form, can be [accessed at this link](#).

Screening Requirements and Recent Travellers

Active screening of anyone entering a licensed retirement home, especially recent travellers, remains critically important during this time. The Ministry of Health updated the COVID-19 Screening Tool for Long-term Care Homes and Retirement Homes to reflect these requirements effective December 9, 2021, which can be [accessed at this link](#).

HEPA Air Purifiers in Retirement Homes

As communicated by the Ontario Retirement Communities Association (ORCA) on December 23, 2021, the Ontario government is providing standalone high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) purifier units to retirement homes in Ontario to help protect residents and staff from COVID-19. The program is free and voluntary.

For more information about this program, please contact ORCA at: info@orcaretirement.com

Staffing Support

Recruitment and Retention Incentive Program

To improve care and reduce staffing shortages in retirement homes, Ontario continues to partner with the Registered Practical Nurses Association of Ontario (WeRPN) to offer the Recruitment and Retention Program (RRI) for Personal Support Workers and Nurses in retirement homes.

Applications for the second round of the RRI opened on December 21, 2021. More information on this program, including an online application form, can be [accessed at this link](#).

While times remain challenging in our sector, I want to thank you for the work you do every day to protect residents from this pandemic. Your continued leadership and vigilance are required in implementing active screening measures, promoting vaccination and maintaining strong IPAC practices with staff, contractors, volunteers, students and visitors. The ministry is working closely with the Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health to monitor the situation and will provide further direction as required

As always, should you have questions you, please contact us at: RHInquiries@ontario.ca.

Sincerely,

Jacqueline Cureton

Assistant Deputy Minister
Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility

c: Carlene Alexander, Deputy Minister, Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility
Dr. Kieran Moore, Chief Medical Officer of Health of Ontario
Dr. Barbara Yaffe, Associate Chief Medical Officer of Health
Jay O'Neill, Chief Executive Officer and Registrar, Retirement Homes Regulatory Authority (RHRA)
Cathy Hecimovich, Chief Executive Officer, Ontario Retirement Communities Association (ORCA)