

October 6, 2023

MEMO TO: Retirement Home Operators and Licensees
FROM: Marsha Pinto, Interim Assistant Deputy Minister
Policy, Programs and Strategic Partnerships Division
Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility
SUBJECT: Fall 2023 Preparedness

I am writing to provide you with essential information and resources to help in your preparation for the upcoming fall respiratory season.

The Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility (MSAA) is pleased to note that the reduction of infection prevention and control (IPAC) measures in retirement homes this June was positively received by residents and their families. The reduced measures helped to support the mental health of residents without increasing infections over the summer months.

MSAA continues to work in collaboration with the Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health (OCMOH) to monitor and assess the risk of respiratory illnesses in retirement homes, as the 2023/24 respiratory season evolves. Recently, [Public Health Ontario](#) (PHO) reported that COVID-19 infections are increasing across the province. Given this rise in viral activity, OCMOH is [encouraging](#) Ontarians to receive influenza (flu) and COVID-19 shots as soon as they become available and to consider wearing a mask.

Based on last year's concurrent circulation of respiratory illnesses and outbreaks, including flu, respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) and COVID-19, MSAA recommends that licensees revisit their IPAC programs to ensure readiness, should the province enter a high-risk/surge period of respiratory virus transmission. It is important for retirement homes to be prepared to prevent and respond to a potentially higher prevalence of respiratory outbreaks this fall and winter. This memo outlines key actions that are advisable to ensure readiness.

1. Infection Prevention and Control (IPAC)

Remaining up-to-date with COVID-19 and flu vaccines continues to be the best defense against severe outcomes from these infectious illnesses. In conjunction with vaccinations, continued adherence to IPAC measures is crucial to **mitigate the risk of outbreaks and spread of respiratory diseases**. Licensees must be mindful of IPAC obligations under the [Retirement Homes Act, 2010 \(RHA\)](#), which include ensuring the

presence of an IPAC program and comprehensive IPAC training for all staff and volunteers.

In addition to the RHA requirements, the June 11, 2022 Chief Medical Officer of Health (CMOH) memo to the RHRA remains in place therefore, retirement homes must continue to follow the measures in the guidance listed below:

- Ministry of Health's (MOH) COVID-19 Guidance: Long-Term Care Homes and Retirement Homes for Public Health Units (PHU) (MOH's Guidance for PHUs) (currently being updated); and
- MSAA's COVID-19 Guidance Document for Retirement Homes in Ontario.

The memo from the CMOH states that it constitutes guidance, advice, or recommendations provided to retirement homes by the CMOH, which licensees shall ensure are followed in the retirement home in accordance with clause 27(5) (0.a) of Ontario Regulation 166/11 (the Regulation) under the RHA.

Additionally, MOH's Guidance for PHUs recommends that retirement homes conduct IPAC self-audits on a quarterly basis to identify and address potential gaps in IPAC best practices, while not in outbreak. IPAC leads in retirement homes who need additional support are encouraged to work with their local PHU or contact their local IPAC Hub for IPAC services. To connect with your local IPAC Hub or for additional information, please contact: IPACHubs@ontario.ca.

In addition, PHO has several tools to aid operators in conducting IPAC self-audits:

- IPAC Checklist for Long-Term Care and Retirement Homes to help guide individuals in conducting IPAC assessments related to COVID-19; and
- Environmental Cleaning Performance Observation Audit to support staff in applying IPAC best practices when cleaning residents' spaces.

2. Vaccination

Licensees are strongly encouraged to promote COVID-19 and flu vaccines and their benefits to all eligible residents, staff, and visitors, as per their obligations under the RHA¹. It is important to note that the flu vaccine may be administered simultaneously, the same day, before or after the COVID-19 vaccine.

Evidence continues to suggest that infection and/or vaccine-acquired immunity from COVID-19 wanes over time. The recommended interval for vaccination remains six months since the last dose (or last infection). The updated XBB COVID-19 vaccine is

¹Licensees' obligations under the RHA include ensuring that residents, staff, and volunteers receive information about the advantages of an annual flu vaccination and where the vaccination is available.

recommended for vulnerable populations, including retirement home residents and has been available since the end of September.

In addition, Ontario is also rolling out its first publicly funded vaccination program of the first Health Canada approved RSV vaccine, Arexvy, for those 60 years and older living in long-term care homes, Elder Care Lodges, and for some retirement home residents. MOH will share additional details on which retirement home residents are eligible shortly.

Licensees are encouraged to plan their vaccine administration as soon as possible. Those operators seeking independent vaccination administration are encouraged to work with their local PHU for onboarding support, plan finalization and to ensure the adequacy of relevant vaccine ancillary supplies for administration. For retirement homes that are unable to independently administer the vaccines, please consider other methods for on-site vaccination for residents, in collaboration with the local PHU, such as working with:

- A co-located or nearby long-term care home; or
- The local PHU or [local pharmacy](#) to arrange for a vaccination clinic.

If your retirement home can help other homes administer vaccines and would like to do so, please contact MSAA at RHInquiries@ontario.ca. If, after working with the local PHU and considering other resources, your retirement home is seeking supports to administer vaccinations on-site, please contact MSAA at RHInquiries@ontario.ca.

Operators are encouraged to start obtaining resident consent for the [COVID-19](#) and flu vaccines and to collaborate with providers such as the local PHU or local pharmacy, as soon as possible, to ensure a smooth vaccine administration process.

Retirement homes not participating in MOH's [2023-2024 Universal Influenza Immunization Program \(UIIP\)](#) or who have not identified a local provider to support with the flu vaccine are strongly encouraged to develop a plan to administer the flu vaccine for residents, staff and visitors.

3. Antiviral Treatments

Licensees are highly encouraged to educate residents on accessing antiviral treatments, including Paxlovid and Remdesivir (for COVID-19) and Tamiflu or Relenza (for influenza). Residents should be encouraged to include antiviral treatments in their plan of care discussions with their primary care providers. Ontario Health advises that antivirals can offer increased protection and limit the severity of illness when taken early in the course of an infection. Individuals aged **60 and over** are among the high risk groups eligible to be tested and assessed for [COVID-19 antiviral treatments](#) (including Paxlovid) as they are at higher risk of severe outcomes from COVID-19. An Ontario Health [patient handout](#) for Paxlovid has been translated into multiple languages as an additional resource.

Residents can also call Health Connect Ontario at Health811 or 1-866-797-0007 (toll-free TTY) for more information on antiviral treatments, assistance, or eligibility for virtual care options.

4. Accessing Rapid Antigen Tests and Emergency Supplies of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

The [PPE Supply Portal \(PSP\)](#) will continue to facilitate orders for rapid antigen tests and emergency supplies of PPE (excluding PCR swabs) this fall/winter season.

The PSP ordering tool is accessible online for efficient access to swift reordering, easy product edits for new orders, and real-time tracking of shipment statuses. Newly licensed retirement homes seeking registration should contact SCO.Supplies@ontario.ca.

Retirement homes continue to have access to rapid antigen tests until December 2023. Licensees are required to ensure that antigen tests provided to them are used only for the purposes of the [Provincial Antigen Screening Program](#). They are not to be resold or distributed to any other organization. By receiving tests through this program, retirement homes are expected to continue to adhere to the terms and conditions established for the program.

If you have any questions, feedback or concerns specifically about the new ordering process, please email SCO.Supplies@ontario.ca.

5. Staffing Contingency and Fallback Planning

It is expected that the upcoming fall/winter respiratory season will impact human resource capacity across the province, including within the retirement home sector. As a reminder, operators should encourage staff to [stay home](#) when they are sick and to follow public health guidance for [return to work](#).

To support preparedness for critical staffing shortages, MSAA highly encourages licensees to review the [RHRA Self-Assessment Tool](#) and become familiar with key considerations when developing a staffing contingency plan, including:

- Changing the scheduling of work or shifts and collecting information about availabilities of staff for alternative shifts;
- Conducting skills and experience inventories of staff to identify viable alternative roles (i.e., cross training staff to work in multiple departments);
- Identifying local college/university/high school students that can provide support; and/or
- Providing appropriate training or education as needed to staff and volunteers.

6. Emergency Planning

Finally, licensees are reminded about their obligations under the RHA and the Regulation to ensure there are safety plans in place including an IPAC program to deal with viral outbreaks and an emergency plan that meets all legislative requirements, including planning for health emergencies such as pandemics and epidemics. The RHRA requires all licensed retirement homes to be prepared to respond to emergencies effectively, with resident safety a priority. To meet this objective, the RHRA has identified critical compliance requirements that are included under:

- [Emergency Planning: Compliance Assistance Module \(rhra.ca\)](#)
- [Emergency-Plan CAM Supplement 05.19.2023.pdf \(rhra.ca\)](#)

As always, I thank you for your efforts in keeping retirement home operations running smoothly while protecting the safety and well-being of retirement home residents and staff.

If you have any additional questions, please contact our team at RHinquiries@ontario.ca.

Sincerely,

Original signed by Marsha Pinto

- c: Melissa Thomson, Deputy Minister, Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility
Dr. Barbara Yaffe, Associate Chief Medical Officer of Health, Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health
Jay O'Neill, Chief Executive Officer and Registrar, Retirement Homes Regulatory Authority
Cathy Hecimovich, Chief Executive Officer, Ontario Retirement Communities Association
Lisa Levin, Chief Executive Officer, AdvantAge Ontario