

Quebec: Profit, deregulation and the L'Isle Verte tragedy

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The remains of 27 people have now been removed from the ruins of the Le Havre retirement home in L'Isle-Verte, Quebec, which was partially destroyed by fire on January 23. Five more people are missing, raising the death toll to 32.

The search for the dead has been hampered by extremely cold weather, frequent strong winds, and the foot-thick ice that covered the residence's water-doused ruins and which was removed only after days of controlled steaming.

Although the exact cause of the fire remains to be determined, it is clear that the absence of sprinklers in the older part of the retirement home, built in 1997, played a determining role in the massive loss of life.

While the older part of the wooden, three story, 52-person residence was quickly engulfed in flames, making it impossible to evacuate the frail residents, the newer part of the residence, built in 2002 and equipped with sprinklers, suffered little damage from the fire.

For decades, firefighters, coroners, and seniors' groups have been urging the Quebec government to make sprinklers mandatory in all seniors' homes. But the province, citing cost concerns, has refused.

Even now, in the wake of the l'Isle Verte tragedy, the Parti Québécois provincial government says that the issue needs further study.

Meanwhile, information has come to light that shows that the owners of seniors' homes and the Quebec government have worked together in recent years to reduce safety standards. Profit, rather than the safety of residents and employees, has been the priority.

Numerous studies have shown the efficacy of sprinklers in slowing the spread of fires. The US National Fire Protection Association says its records show that no more than two people have ever died in a fire at an educational, institutional, or residential building fully-equipped with an automatic sprinkler system.

Yet in Quebec—where large numbers of seniors are housed in wooden buildings—the government requires only sprinklers in residences that are four stories or higher or in

which persons deemed to have lost all autonomy reside.

Thirty-seven of the residents at the Résidence Le Havre were 85 or older, some suffered from Alzheimer's, others were blind, and most used walkers or wheel-chairs to get around. But the Quebec government did not require sprinklers because the home's residents were deemed to be "semi-autonomous."

According to the president of the Quebec Association of the Chiefs of Fire Safety, Daniel Brazeau, "A sprinkler is equivalent to the presence of a firefighter in the heart of the outbreak of a fire in the early moments. This helps to contain the destructive force before the arrival of first responders."

"We are quite exasperated by the situation," Daniel Perron, president of the Quebec Fire Chiefs Association, said last Monday in an interview with Postmedia. "We have been asking (for mandatory sprinklers) for years, but our thinkers, our deciders, they go and find things that delay us."

He cited the classification of seniors as "autonomous" and "semi-autonomous" as an example. "Even if a person can use a fork and feed themselves," said Perron, "it does not mean they can jump out of bed if there is a fire at night."

Perron said that being an advocate for sprinklers in Canada is "like being a priest: You preach and preach, but many people still go to hell."

According to the Montreal daily *La Presse*, 976 of the province's 1,953 private seniors' homes have a frame made entirely of wood. Of these 976, 699 have no sprinkler system whatsoever. In other words, roughly 36 percent of the province's private retirement homes are made entirely of wood and have no sprinkler system.

The previous Liberal government established an inter-ministerial working committee to draft new safety standards for seniors' residences. However the efforts of representatives of the Chiefs of Fire Safety and other groups to press from within this committee for making sprinklers mandatory were frustrated by seniors' home operators and the government. They argued such a regulation would impose excessive costs. Years later the issue is still being studied.

Only in 2000 did the Quebec government order that when new provincial government nursing homes (CHSLDs) are built they be equipped with automatic sprinklers. In the wake of the L'Isle-Verte tragedy, Health and Social Services Minister Réjean Hébert was forced to concede the government had no idea what percentage of CHSLDs have automatic sprinklers. "Is it 80 percent? 70 percent?"

Last Friday, *La Presse* reported that the government has since discovered that almost 15 percent of CHSLDs are not fully protected by sprinklers, although the persons housed in these residents have, even according to the government's definition, lost their autonomy. Twenty-five of the 393 CHSLDs that had been canvased did not have any sprinklers, and another 31 were only partially covered.

Both the government and retirement home owners claim that there is a "lack of money." According to Yves Desjardins, president of the Quebec Coalition of Private Seniors' Residences, "For homes with under 16 residents, the profit margin of the owners is often minimal or nonexistent. Small homes cannot pay for all these changes. And closing small village homes would be disastrous for the seniors who live there. It's good to tighten security, but we should consider several factors before taking action."

In other areas, seniors' homes operators and construction companies have successfully pushed for a weakening of regulatory standards.

In 2005, the federal government abolished the National Building Code requirement that firewalls be built of concrete or masonry, so as to allow for the use of cheaper, less-fire resistant materials, such as thick gypsum board. Had the newer half of the Résidence Le Havre been built after 2005, it is possible last week's fire could have claimed even more lives, since a cinder-block firewall appears to have played a significant role in preventing the blaze from spreading there.

Health Minister Hébert also revealed last week that in December the government made a change in nighttime staffing requirements at the province's seniors' homes, allowing them to replace specially trained nighttime personnel with attendants or even resident-volunteers with only basic first-aid and fire-security training.

Hébert is claiming that the government's intention was that this weaker standard would only apply to smaller seniors' homes with less than 50 residents, but that an error was made in the drafting of the new regulation meaning that, as currently written, it applies to larger residences as well.

Even if Hébert is telling the truth, this mistake only underscores the government's negligence and indifference.

"There was a strong lobby to relax this rule, but I resisted," claimed Hébert, "and I have always resisted... We will not compromise when it comes to security of people and the quality of services."

The L'Isle Verte tragedy demonstrates, however, that PQ and Liberal governments have repeatedly compromised safety.

Moreover, Hébert has admitted that in changing the regulations governing nighttime personnel he bowed to demands from seniors' homes in small communities that said they needed to cut costs.

"They argued that you didn't need a staff member at night," said Hébert. "It could be a resident with training to deal with emergencies and we agreed. Otherwise these homes would have been forced to increase rents or even be decertified, which would defeat the purpose."

On the night of January 23, in conformity with Quebec government norms, only two people were working at Résidence Le Havre when the fire erupted. According to press reports, they made valiant efforts to rescue the residents, pounding on their doors as the building became rapidly engulfed in fire and smoke.

Speaking last Wednesday and even after reaffirming the government's intention to allow the replacement of trained nighttime personnel at smaller senior' residences, Hébert continued to refuse to commit the government to requiring all seniors' homes to install automatic sprinkler systems. He justified this by saying that the retrofit could cost as much \$80 million: "It hasn't been done because it is a complex problem... Installing sprinklers in an existing building is a major renovation."

The refusal to make sprinklers mandatory and other regulatory failures aimed at protecting the profits of the owners of private seniors' residences and keeping taxes low on big business and the rich have resulted in a series of deadly fires at seniors' homes across Canada that is without parallel in the advanced capitalist world.

These include a fire at a seniors' home in Notre-Dame-du-Lac, Quebec in 1969 that killed 54 people; the deaths of 21 more seniors in a fire in Petty Harbour, Newfoundland in 1976; a fire in Mississauga, Ontario in 1980 that killed 25 people; and a fire at an Orillia, Ontario retirement home in 2009 that killed four people and left six others critically injured.



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