

# Five Canadian health care workers die within a week as COVID-19 infections rise sharply nationwide

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COVID-19 infections continue to spike across Canada at a record pace of more than 7,000 new cases per day. Health Canada reported that as of January 5, 618,000 Canadians had contracted the virus since last March. There have been 16,230 deaths. Over 4,000 COVID-19 patients are currently hospitalized.

Field hospitals have been opened in Ontario and Alberta to cope with a rapidly collapsing hospital infrastructure. In London, Ontario a refrigerated truck has been pressed into service to take the overflow of corpses from a local morgue.

Within the past week alone, five health care workers have died from the virus, two in Alberta, two in Ontario, and one in Quebec.

Although there is no overall centralized tracking system breaking down particular industry sector deaths, at least 31 health care workers have died from COVID-19 in Canada. Fifteen of these deaths were in Ontario.

As of late July, health care workers had accounted for about 20 percent of all COVID-19 cases in Canada. Especially hard hit have been workers at long-term care facilities and retirement homes, which have been the epicentre of the pandemic in Canada. More than 12,000 residents of nursing homes and seniors' residences have perished thus far.

Sheila Yakovishin, who worked at Berkshire Care Centre in Windsor, Ontario, succumbed to the virus on December 31. Yakovishin was 60 years old and had worked at the facility for almost 32 years.

Erica Hooker, executive director of Berkshire Care Centre, described Yakovishin as a dedicated and well-loved member of the community. "Despite having other health issues, Sheila always persevered and put the care

of others before her own. She had a giant heart, and it showed each and every day in the care and support that she provided to residents and to her colleagues," she commented.

The COVID-19 outbreak was declared at Berkshire Care Centre on December 11. At least 82 patients at the facility have tested positive for the virus, as well as 38 staff, according to the Windsor-Essex County Health Unit. At least 7 residents have died of the virus since the beginning of the current outbreak. Across the Windsor-Essex region, there are 20 long-term care and retirement homes facing pandemic outbreaks, with hundreds of active cases among residents and staff. Prior to the Christmas holiday break, three local schools declared outbreaks along with several greenhouse operations.

Sheila Yakovishin was a member of Unifor. "On behalf of our union, I express the deepest condolences to Sheila's family and all those who knew and loved her. As the New Year begins, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to rage unchecked in Ontario's for-profit long-term care homes," said Unifor President Jerry Dias in a statement. "It must be stopped, we must protect health care workers from this disease."

Dias has no shame. He and his union have backed the reckless return-to-work drive for non-essential workers implemented by the corporate elite, the Conservative provincial government of Premier Doug Ford and federal Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. Dias is a major booster of the "progressive" federal Liberal government and has complimented Ford and his Tories for "rowing in the same direction" as Trudeau, corporate Canada and the trade unions, even as the pandemic response of both levels of government has

led to an utter catastrophe for working people.

Canada's health care and seniors' care systems, which have been deliberately underfunded by all governments whatever their political stripe for decades, are buckling under the strain. Officials in Ottawa and Toronto have admitted that contact tracing has largely collapsed, which has resulted in a further acceleration of transmission. Labs are overstretched, resulting in long delays in obtaining test results. Outrageously, health care workers still struggle to find adequate protective equipment more than ten months after the virus made its first appearance in Canada.

The shambolic state of the health care system in the face of a second pandemic wave that all serious experts warned was inevitable is the responsibility of the entire political establishment.

Ford's boast that his government would erect an "iron ring" around long-term care facilities has proven to be a cruel hoax. On Monday, the Ontario government reported that there were active COVID-19 outbreaks in 219, or more than a third, of the province's long-term care homes.

"Large numbers of staff infections" put seniors' residences and care homes "under tremendous pressure, forcing them to seek help from outside agency workers," a Toronto-area care worker told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "These workers are often put in a terrible position: under-trained, under-prepared, poorly paid and forced by the nature of their work (and lack of full-time employment at a liveable wage) to go from facility to facility, endangering themselves, their families, and the people they care for."

Yakovishin's New Years' Eve death follows the December 28th demise of 61-year-old Jose Marie Corral, a health care aide at Calgary's Bethany Riverview continuing care home. The particulars of a second Alberta health care worker who lost their life in recent days have not yet been released. On January 2, Oscar Anibal Rodriguez, an orderly at the CHSLD Sainte-Antoine long-term care residence in Quebec City, died. Rodriguez was in his late fifties. The outbreak at the Quebec residence is graded by the provincial government as "critical" with over one hundred infections and 12 deaths during the current outbreak.

Vaccinations had already begun at the Sainte-Antoine facility, but Rodriguez had not yet received his initial

inoculation. Less than one percent of the Canadian population has received a vaccination to date as a result of an ongoing fiasco in the distribution of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines across the country.

The latest health care worker death was confirmed yesterday, when it was announced that Maureen Ambersley, a registered practical nurse in Mississauga, had succumbed to the disease. Ambersley, who worked as a nurse for 16 years, died Tuesday aged 57. She leaves behind her two children aged 26 and 28.

Both workers at long-term care facilities and family members of residents have been protesting at hard-hit facilities across the country. On January 2, protestors gathered at a 254-bed Tendercare facility in the Toronto borough of Scarborough to demand better care and protections.

During the second wave of the pandemic, 64 of the home's residents have already died from the virus. Over Christmas, 77 staff members were off sick with the infection. Another 60 residents are currently infected.

Workers in Ontario's home care residences continue to receive substandard pay, work grueling schedules, and struggle to receive adequate personal protective equipment. At the same time, residents of the care facilities receive dwindling service and attention.



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