

Damning report exposes Ontario government's catastrophic pandemic policy in long-term care facilities

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Ombudsman Ontario released its report on the province's ruinous response to the long-term care (LTC) homes ravaged by the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 at the beginning of September. The report is the latest in a trove of evidence that underscores the criminal role the Tory Ford government played in the preventable mass infection and death of the elderly under provincial care during the first years of the pandemic, including a lawsuit registered earlier this year by the families of deceased care home residents.

Titled, "Lessons for the Long Term" the report identifies a provincial oversight system that was "wholly incapable and unprepared" for the COVID-19 pandemic. During the first wave, the report revealed, the ground inspections of long-term care homes which had been drastically reduced in 2018 by the Tory provincial government collapsed into a "complete system breakdown."

The report recounts that during this period the ombudsman's office was inundated with hundreds of complaints and inquiries about the government's planning and early response, including the use of personal protective equipment, COVID testing, infection prevention and control, and restrictions on visitors in LTC facilities. There were also reports of patient neglect stemming from years of chronic understaffing.

Despite these serious concerns, on-site inspections at LTCs simply stopped. In fact, for a seven-week period from mid-March to early May 2020, as the virus ripped through the population, there was not one independent on-site verification of the conditions in long-term care homes. Moreover, serious "non-compliance" issues by the private operators identified later on in the pandemic—including inadequate infection prevention and control and failure to report COVID-19 outbreaks—went completely ignored by the provincial authorities.

The ombudsman's report follows a series of exposures which further vindicate the analysis put forward by the *World Socialist Web Site* in the early stages of the pandemic

that mass suffering and death was foreseeable and foreseen without immediate action to stop the spread of the virus. Tragically, profit-driven long-term care homes suffering from decades of malign neglect by the operators and successive governments were quickly transformed into killing fields.

Last January, a provincial court judge confronted with overwhelming evidence granted certification to a class-action lawsuit against the Ontario government. In *Robertson v. Ontario*, families of care home residents charge that the province was "grossly negligent" both before and during the early stages of the pandemic in failing to prevent waves of long-term care deaths and serious illness among volunteers or visitors. In the court filing, the plaintiffs assert that the province's conduct both before and during the pandemic was "reckless," "woefully deficient," "extremely careless" and "a marked departure from any reasonable standard of care."

In his decision, Justice Edward Belobaba cited statements by leading microbiologist Dr. Dick Zoutman, who explained to the court that 90 percent of care home deaths could have been prevented if the province had acted sooner to implement measures such as screening tests and masking.

Also referenced in the court ruling was a 2020 report by the Long-Term Care Commission, which concluded that the province failed to learn the lessons from the 2003 SARS outbreak. The report exposed how ill-prepared the country's emergency and health systems were, at both the national and provincial levels, to cope with the spread of a deadly virus despite having had close to a two-decade warning.

Unsurprisingly, the Ford government rejects any culpability for its crimes and has already appealed the lawsuit with the outrageous claim that the decision to proceed would have a serious impact on the "principle of government immunity." This is a reference to the SORA (Supporting Ontario's Recovery Act) law, enacted in 2020, which enables the ruling class to pursue its profits over lives

policies with impunity by prohibiting almost all litigation over COVID-19 related illness.

A year into the pandemic, the Ontario government continued to do nothing to stem the spread of the virus in care homes.

A 2021 Nursing and Residential Care Facility Survey revealed that despite the well-known link between COVID-19 outbreaks and poor ventilation, less than a third of nursing homes made changes to ventilation or air purification systems in 2021, and less than one in five seniors' homes. Only 20 percent of nursing homes and 5 percent of seniors' homes indicated that they had converted rooms into semi-private and private. Half or more of responding nursing homes and seniors' homes in 2021 reported an increase in staffing challenges over the same period in the previous year.

In March, Ford dismantled remaining COVID-19 protections, including the cancellation of the paid sick day program and testing for long-term care staff, caregivers and visitors who do not show symptoms, and the removal of the one caregiver rule during a COVID-19 outbreak. Masking indoors and social distancing for residents, caregivers and visitors was no longer recommended. Screening and temperature checks for residents was also no longer required by the operators.

The Ontario government has now committed billions of dollars to upgrades and expansion of the same care homes where scenes of carnage took place early in the pandemic.

One of the more heinous cases is the Orchard Villa care home in Pickering, where a shocking 80 residents died needlessly. It is also one of the homes currently being sued by families of those who died in a class-action lawsuit. Orchard Villa's parent company, Extendicare (Canada) Inc. owns a network of 118 facilities across Ontario and Alberta. It has a reported revenue of \$1.13 billion. Extendicare has boasted about its \$10 million payouts to shareholders during the pandemic while spending a mere \$300,000 on COVID-19 protections.

The ruthless corporate operators will not tolerate any impingement on their profits. As the Ontario government's promise of 60,000 new and upgraded beds by 2028 draws nearer, many nursing home operators in Toronto are vacating the sector rather than undertaking mandatory upgrades, creating a property sell-off.

Behind the blatant criminal indifference to the protection of the elderly is a class war agenda waged not just by the Ford government and the ruthless care home operators, but by the federal Liberal government on behalf of the entire Canadian ruling class. In lockstep with its political counterparts in the US and internationally, it adopted a homicidal "profits-before-life" policy, normalizing mass

death and the debilitation of society's most vulnerable in the interests of profit.

Supported by its allies in the trade unions and New Democratic Party, the Trudeau Liberals dismantled the last remaining federal COVID protections in the spring of 2022 in response to the occupation of downtown Ottawa by the far-right "Freedom" Convoy. This fascistic movement, which called for the establishment of an authoritarian junta to eliminate all public health measures, received backing from key sections of the ruling class.

According to Tara Moriarty, infectious disease scientist and a co-founder of COVID-19 Resources Canada, roughly 1 in 29 people are currently infected with COVID-19, with roughly six times more infections per day than the figures before Omicron and before the lowest period of the epidemic in Canada to date. COVID is now the third leading cause of death in Canada. More than 100 Quebec long-term care homes are currently grappling with COVID-19 outbreaks.

Yet, the pandemic has been officially declared over and an effective coverup of this still unfolding social crime is well underway. Regular media briefings that the public relied on for a current and accurate picture of the pandemic has been discontinued. Ontario's COVID-19 dashboard, updated only weekly, relies on lagging wastewater sampling and hospitalizations data, which do not necessarily provide an accurate and current reflection of infection in the population.

The way out of the nightmarish policy of "forever COVID" is the fight for a science-based elimination strategy on an international scale. This is an impossible task under the current social and economic setup where the world's resources are divided up among competing nation-states whose ruling elites' drive for profits compels them toward the destruction of society through dictatorship, world war, future pandemics and climate catastrophe.

A political struggle must be waged against the whole capitalist system and for the socialist reorganization of the world's resources to meet the basic needs of humanity, including life saving protections against disease and the humane treatment of the elderly. The world's working class, the real progenitors of society's wealth, will be the political spearhead of such a movement.



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