

Your Voice Can Make a Difference to Wellness in Long Term Care!

by Carol Dueck Member of CARP's Advocacy Working Group on Long-term Care in Ontario and Chair of Advocacy Family Council Network Four Retired Teachers:

For the past five years, Ottawa's Chapter Advocacy Working Group on Long-term Care (CAWG) has endeavoured to influence the Ontario government to change long-term care facilities from institutions to homes. This means transitioning from the traditional, medical, and task-oriented model of care to a person centred approach, where 12-16 residents would live in a smaller homelike environment, and where residents, staff, and families are treated with the dignity and respect they deserve.

The Mission of the working group is clear. "Cold and clinical warehouses where people go to die must change. We need warm, compassionate, homelike places where residents can truly live. Ontario's LTC homes urgently need a revolution in how they provide care."

Many people shudder and avoid the topic of Long Term Care. "I will never go to a nursing home or put my parent there!" Ontarians have memories of the trauma exposed by the media during the covid 19 pandemic during which residents in LTC died at an alarming rate, loneliness and depression spiked as families were prevented from visiting, and countless stories of deplorable care made headlines. CAWG is encouraging people to join our advocacy voice to ensure that the next pandemic finds seniors in Ontario in a safe and 22 RTOERO Toronto District 16 Newsletter Feature Articles homelike environment and so that you, or your family member, are no longer frightened at the prospect of having to choose a home to move into.

Yes, the current government has made inroads to improve the LTC system including providing focused funds for training of staff, increasing funding (though compensation for staff is still far from a living wage), promising to build 30,000 more beds, and offering grants to non-profit organizations to grapple with the high cost of land and construction. All good starts to their "Fixing Long Term Act, 2021", but these are only the first steps on a long journey to correct substandard conditions and to retrofit old institutional buildings. Ontario has fallen behind in providing LTC homes to meet the population demands; there are currently over 6000 people on the emergency list and nearly 48,000 on the waitlist to access one of the 613 LTC homes in the province.

This wait list will continue to grow. After a decade of planning, fundraising, and achieving approval to build, it takes two to three years to open a new facility. And now there are older buildings that are surrendering their licenses to operate a LTC home as it is too expensive to upgrade their facilities to meet the current standards. The spiralling cost of land and outdated building standards make it challenging to create cost-effective small home environments consisting of 12-16 rooms that are linked to comfortable dining and living spaces. Consequently, we see more of the same large institutional towers being built, with each level having 32 beds. This is NOT what my home looks like and it does not feel like 'home' to residents.

The encouraging news is that there are organizations that have seen the vision, taken the leap, and built or altered current buildings to create smaller homelike pods with colourful, personalized decor. The additional exciting change is that more LTC homes are adapting innovative care models that focus on “person-centred care” (also known as emotion-based care) where the resident has choice and input into how the day unfolds and what activities they wish to participate in. If you are happier sleeping in and then having a coffee and a light breakfast at 10 a.m., you shouldn’t be forced into a busy dining room for a big meal at 8 o’clock! Importantly, these care models are producing evidence of improved happiness and well-being for the residents, with less falls, infections, and trips to the emergency department. Staff actually enjoy their role, experience less Spring 2025 23 Feature Articles sick time, fewer injuries, and there is less turnover. It is reassuring that funding was granted in 2024 to improve dementia care; this needs to evolve quickly into sustainable funding to support the innovative models embedded within dementia care.

If you are on the journey to find a home for your loved one, one important question on your checklist is to ask which of the innovative models is offered at the home. A website that offers easy reading and short videos to help you understand how these models of care and smaller homes make life significantly better for residents and staff can be found at changeltcnow.ca

You can add your “Vibrant Voice” to a team that advocates for Long Term Care (LTC)! The Canadian Association for Retired Persons (CARP) is one of Canada’s largest advocacy organizations with over 200,000 members.