

Sisters say long-term-care home put ‘roadblocks’ in way of visiting their dad before he died

Essential caregiver status is supposed to allow family access to loved ones despite COVID-19

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- MARIA IQBAL



Sandie Berenger and her sister say they went through many hurdles to become designated essential caregivers at Heritage Green Nursing Home, which they say hampered their time with their dad.

The family of a man who lived at a Hamilton long-term-care home are speaking out about their battle with the facility to allow them to be considered essential visitors before his death.

Sisters Sandie Berenger and Janet Volkes say Heritage Green Nursing Home in Stoney Creek threw “unnecessary” hurdles in their way as they tried to visit their father, even though they’d been designated his caregivers.

“They just kept putting out roadblocks trying to control who came in,” said Volkes.

Berenger was the power of attorney for their father, Norman Hoar, and wrote to Heritage Green that she and Volkes were his essential caregivers.

She emailed the director of care and submitted a printout of the note to the home’s front desk.

Both sisters, who sit on the home’s family council, got COVID -19 tests per provincial guidelines, and after receiving results, Volkes called Heritage Green to book a visit. She says she was passed on to someone else to book a 30-minute lobby visit instead of one in her father’s room. Volkes went ahead with the visit Nov. 1, intending to followup for essential visitor status afterward. It ended up being her last visit.

Heritage Green administrator Scott Kozachenko did not respond to multiple email and telephone requests for an interview.

The Spectator previously reported about Berenger, Volkes and their father when Hamilton's first COVID-19 outbreak was announced at the home in March. At the time, family

members of residents and the union representing workers were concerned about a lack of communication about its spread.

Their fight for access began in October, after the Ontario government updated its visitor policy for long-term care homes in September. Previously, during the first wave, an "essential visitor" was defined as someone "performing essential support services or a person visiting a very ill or palliative resident." The province clarified that that included family caregivers.

Under the policy, residents in long-term care or their substitute decision-makers can designate up to two caregivers who can visit residents any time without time limits, subject to direction from the local public health unit.

As of Nov. 23, when Hamilton entered the red zone, the province requires essential caregivers to be tested weekly for COVID-19 and show proof of a negative test result before visiting.

Jacqueline Durlov, a city com

munications officer, said longterm-care facilities can introduce more restrictions than what the province requires to ensure safety.

"It's really the facility's responsibility to provide the safest environment for their residents," she said.

Heritage Green did not respond to questions about their essential visitor policies.

Volkes says when she followed up with Heritage Green's administration after her lobby visit, she was told the home would hold a conference call to discuss policies with her first.

"I just see it as a big stalling tactic," said Volkes. "I had gotten to the point that if this had gone on any further, I was going to hire a lawyer."

But a few days later, her father's condition suddenly became worse. On Nov. 5 he was moved to Juravinski Hospital, where they were able to visit him. He died the next day. "It's been incredibly heartbreaking and stressful," said Volkes. "They made my life hell unnecessarily."

As for Berenger, when she called to book an appointment, she says she was asked how she would be caring for her father. She listed off different tasks, including that she was going to tidy out his room for the first time since February. She got in.

"You had to say the right words," said Berenger.

On her last visit before her father was sent to hospital, Berenger brought her father lunch. After about an hour and a half, she was told to leave because staff were changing shifts.

Berenger said while staff took good care of her father, she feels like she had to prove she was providing essential care to get into the home. She thinks the facility was nervous about COVID-19 entering the home, but doesn't think it's fair for families or the residents.

"The long-term care should trust families," said Berenger. "We're there to help them. We're not their enemies."

In an earlier interview, Dr. Amit Arya said family caregivers provide essential services that reduce the workload of long-term-care staff.

“In many circumstances when homes were shortstaffed, family caregivers were the glue that tried to hold things together,” said the assistant

professor in palliative care at McMaster University. He noted family members often provide hands-on care and, importantly, help relieve isolation.

He added when family members were shut out of longterm-care homes in the first wave, residents were left “doubly vulnerable.”

“There weren’t enough staff to look after them and their family wasn’t there either,”

Arya said. “People literally suffered and died alone.”

Social isolation and loneliness were already a “serious health risk” for seniors before the pandemic, leading to cognitive decline and a higher risk of infection, falls and mortality, Arya noted.

Family members also had to face separation from their loved ones and, in some cases, grieve without closure.

He said visitor policies need to balance all of those risks.

“We cannot make people’s lives only about infection control,” Arya said. “They need to allow family caregivers in.”