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Canada's largest private retirement home operator wants to stop quarantining new residents - but experts say that could put seniors at risk

Josh Rubin

Canada's largest private retirement home operator says Ontario should loosen restrictions on retirement homes, but health experts and seniors' advocates warn such a move could put vulnerable seniors at greater risk of exposure to COVID-19.

A spokesperson for Chartwell Retirement Residences says the company believes new residents of its retirement homes shouldn't have to be quarantined for 14 days.

"We believe with the right protocols in place, including the existing requirement in Ontario for a negative test prior to move-in, along with enhanced move-in processes and socially distanced protocols, new move-ins need not be forced to isolate in their suites for 14 days," said Chartwell spokesperson Sharon Ranalli.

York University professor Tamara Daly, chair of the university's Centre for Aging Research and Education, said it's no coincidence Chartwell wants the 14-day

quarantine for new residents eliminated: It's cutting into the company's bottom line.

"This is a business that's heavily reliant on bricks and mortar buildings, and getting more residents in. So not being able to maintain that occupancy level is a threat to the business," said Daly.

In its second-quarter earnings report, Chartwell said it had 67 per cent fewer people moving in than it did in the same quarter last year. (It also had 28 per cent fewer moving out). The company also had a second-quarter loss of \$1.9 million, up from \$1.5 million a year ago. It continues to pay unitholders a distribution of 5.1 cents per unit (the financial equivalent of paying a dividend).

Getting rid of the quarantine requirement would be a mistake, Daly said.

"Policy-makers need to be very clear about whether they're protecting dollars and cents, or people's health. If the government lifts the quarantine requirement, that would show it's about dollars and cents," she said.

Chartwell, Canada's largest private retirement home operator believes new residents of its retirement homes shouldn't have to be quarantined for 14 days and wants the province to loosen the restrictions.

The head of a seniors' advocacy group agrees with Daly that the business rationale for wanting the quarantine requirement lifted is clear.

"For owners and investors, do I understand it? Yes. ... We're seeing private enterprise do what private enterprise does," said Laura Tamblyn Watts, CEO of CanAge.

The suggestion from Chartwell isn't aimed at the more tightly regulated long-term-care homes that saw a wave of COVID-19 deaths during the spring and early summer. (Roughly 80 per cent of Canada's COVID-19 deaths have occurred in long-term-care homes. An investigation by the Star found that for-profit homes account for fewer than 60 per cent of long-term-care homes in Ontario, but account for 16 of the 20 worst outbreaks.)

Instead, Chartwell is arguing that retirement home residents are less vulnerable than people living in long-term-care homes, so a 14-day requirement for new residents isn't necessary.

"Retirement residences have had vastly different experiences with outbreaks than long-term-care homes. In our retirement residences we serve more independent and healthier residents in a physical setting similar to that of an apartment, with a range of services available, with the residences layouts also being more conducive to adapt to social-spaced dining and activities," added Ranalli, who insisted Chartwell hadn't lobbied any governments for the change.

Watts says while there once may have been a major distinction between the type of care given in retirement homes and long-term-care facilities, that has largely been erased, as seniors and their families come to terms with a massive shortage in long-term-care spaces.

"Retirement homes have become something they were not designed to be. They've become a de facto substitute for long-term care, because of the consistent shortage of long-term-care beds.... Functionally, they've become equivalent," said Watts.

Dr. Abdu Sharkawy, an infectious disease specialist at the University of Toronto's School of Medicine, argued that the distinction between the two types of homes is so small that it's almost immaterial when it comes to eliminating quarantine requirements.

"The distinction between retirement home and long-term-care residents isn't nearly enough to warrant getting rid of the protection a quarantine gives. Just

because you can feed yourself and are able to use the bathroom independently doesn't mean you're any less vulnerable," said Sharkawy..

"At a time when we're on the cusp of a second wave, this would be highly questionable. It would almost certainly lead to more outbreaks," said Sharkawy.

A spokesperson for seniors minister Raymond Cho said the Ontario government is doing its best to keep seniors safe from the global pandemic.

"Throughout this pandemic, the advice of the Chief Medical Officer of Health has guided our reopening policy. Since we first learned of COVID-19, the government has been diligently monitoring and taking deliberate actions to contain the spread of this new virus. Our government is also allocating \$20 million over two years to protect seniors in licensed retirement homes through increased infection control and active screening procedures," said Elric Pereira.

In an email, Dr. David Williams, the province's Chief Medical Officer of Health, said his office hadn't been contacted by Chartwell, adding there's no change planned.

"At this time, there are no plans to eliminate or reduce the 14-day self-isolation requirement," said Williams.

In 2010, there were 19,000 people on the waiting list for long-term care. Last year, there were 38,000.

Some long-term-care facilities and retirement homes are in the same buildings, Watts said.

"In some buildings, there are different

floors subject to different regulations, but offering largely the same services," Watts added.

Josh Rubin is a Toronto-based business reporter. Follow him on Twitter: @star-beer