

## Ontario lifts restrictions on long-term care visits, encourages social circles

The Ontario Government has begun lifting restrictions on visits to long-term care homes, retirement homes and other residential care settings, as public health units across the Province continue to post encouraging figures.

The government announced Thursday that strict health and safety guidelines will be required to protect residents, visitors and staff alike as families prepare to spend time with their loved ones again after more than two months apart.

“Thanks to the hard work of our frontline workers and the collective efforts of everyone in stopping the spread, we can now allow families to reunite with their loved ones safely and in person with strict public health measures to protect residents, visitors and staff,” said Premier Doug Ford. “But, I ask everyone to be cautious and act [responsibly] as the battle to contain COVID-19 is not over and the risk to our loved ones still remains.”

As of this Thursday, June 18, family and friends will be allowed to visit these settings provided the residence in question is not in active outbreak mode.

Retirement homes will be able to resume indoor and outdoor visits in designated areas or residential suites when physical distancing can be maintained.

Other residential care settings will be allowed outdoor visits of two people at a time with physical distancing required for all visits.

All visitors will be subject to new protocols, including passing active screening every time they visit, confirming with staff they have tested negative for COVID-19 within the previous two weeks, and complying with the infection prevention and control protocols in place, including the bringing and wearing of face coverings during visits.

Long-term care homes must also do their part by having an established process in place for communicating visitor protocols and associated safety procedures.

While the COVID-19 outbreak within the walls of Chartwell Aurora (formerly Resthaven) remains closed, the Region of York announced Friday a twelfth Chartwell Aurora resident had succumbed to the virus.

According to Patrick Casey, Director of Corporate Communications for the Region of York, the resident in question was an 85-year-old woman who lost the fight Tuesday, June 9, at Southlake Regional Health Centre. She displayed symptoms on Tuesday, April 21 and tested positive

on Thursday, April 23.

Her death brings the number of COVID-19-related deaths within Aurora to 15.

At press time, there were a total of 12 active cases within Aurora and 84 cases deemed resolved and recovered for a total of 111 confirmed cases.

Region-wide, as of Tuesday evening, there are 391 active cases, 235 deaths, and 2,173 recoveries, for a total of 2,799.

As family and friends of residents in long-term care and retirement residences prepare for a return to some degree of normalcy, the Province is also encouraging residents at large to develop social circles while restrictions continue to ease.

Forming a "social circle" of no more than 10 people who can interact and come into close contact with one another without physical distancing will help reduce social isolation.

"Social circles will support the mental health and wellbeing of Ontarians and help reduce social isolation," the Province said Friday.

Added Premier Ford: "At the outset of the pandemic, we had to make the necessary, but difficult decision to ban large public gatherings and strongly advise [against] physical distancing with everyone except immediate household members. As the public health trends improve and our collective efforts start to pay off, we're now able to take another step forward today by allowing families and their loved ones to reunite and spend time with one another safely through social circles."

To develop your "social circle", the Province advises residents to start with their current circle: "the people you live with who regularly come into your household."

"If your current circle is under 10 people, you can add members to your circle, including those from another household, family members or friends," said the Province. "Get agreement from everyone that they will join the circle. Keep your social circle safe. Maintain physical distancing with anyone outside your circle; and be true to your circle. No one should be part of more than one circle."

"The rules for social circles are different from the proposed expansion of social gatherings from five to 10 people. Social gatherings can be any 10 people from outside your household, but where physical distancing of at least two metres should be maintained. For example, the expansion of social gatherings enables individuals and families to enjoy the company of others at backyard barbecues and picnics in neighbourhood parks,

while respecting physical distancing advice.

?On the other hand, social circles will enable Ontarians to enjoy close contact with members of their circle. This could include hugging, carpooling, enjoying a patio and sharing a meal without staying two metres apart. Ontarians should avoid close-contact activities with anyone outside of their circle if they are unable to maintain physical distancing. Social circles will also bring back supports from people outside of their household who can now help with children, seniors or those in need.?

**By Brock Weir**