

NEWS RELEASE

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Pandemic response highlights improvements needed to protect seniors in care

Edmonton, Alberta, Canada... Insufficient preparedness, severe care staffing shortages, and outdated infrastructure were among the key findings in a newly released *Report of the Auditor General—COVID-19 in Continuing Care Facilities*.

Auditor General Doug Wylie concluded that Alberta Health and Alberta Health Services (AHS) had processes to respond to COVID-19 in continuing care facilities, but many were ineffective.

“Continuing care facilities serve some of the most vulnerable of our society. These are our parents, grandparents and friends who deserve to be kept safe,” said Auditor General Doug Wylie. “The COVID-19 response was impeded by insufficient preparedness and structural barriers—many of which have been long-standing—that existed at the start of the pandemic.”

“Yet, we consistently saw examples of people across the continuing care system adapting, finding workarounds and temporary solutions to structural problems, and a genuine effort to critically evaluate what was working and what was not, so that they could continuously improve their response over time. We cannot overstate the dedication, focus, and care shown by people across the system in responding to COVID-19. It is critical that this same unwavering effort now be directed to learn from these experiences and make the necessary improvements to better care for our vulnerable seniors.”

As the impact of COVID-19 on continuing care facilities became clear in March of 2020, the Auditor General determined he would report to Albertans on the response to COVID-19 in these facilities. The Auditor General also decided to provide an assessment of Alberta Health and AHS progress on recommendations from 2014 at the same time.

Report of the Auditor General—COVID-19 in Continuing Care Facilities Performance Audit

This audit focused on the public health response by Alberta Health and AHS to COVID-19 in Alberta’s 355 publicly funded continuing care facilities during the first two waves of the pandemic from March to December 2020. During this time frame, 379 outbreaks accounted for more than 8,300 COVID-19 cases and 1,000 deaths in those facilities.

The audit examined four key areas of the province’s COVID-19 response: pre-pandemic planning and preparedness; guidance and communication between provincial authorities and continuing care facilities; providing key resources to facilities; and monitoring how facilities, as well as Alberta Health and AHS, were responding to COVID-19 in continuing care facilities.

The Auditor General made eight recommendations. Four speak to preparedness and structural factors that challenged the COVID-19 response. These include updating and coordinating pandemic plans and preparedness, increasing the resilience of the facility staffing system, and resolving infrastructure limitations. Four additional recommendations speak to ensuring that adaptations, learnings, and other processes that were developed or reinforced to resolve problems during COVID-19 are not lost.

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Report of the Auditor General— Seniors Care in Long-term Care Assessment of Implementation

“I am pleased to report that management has implemented three of our previous recommendations,” said Wylie.” Our new recommendations speak to improving Alberta’s long-term care system’s accountability and ensuring resident care is not compromised by insufficient staffing levels. Albertans can and should expect this system to have clear goals, regular measurement and accountability for results, and continuous improvement at its core.”

The work of the Auditor General focused on Alberta Health and AHS’ actions from late 2014 to December 2019. This ensured the assessment looked at actions in a normal state of operations and did not unduly reflect the extraordinary circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. This assessment looks only at the long-term care system because that was the focus of our 2014 recommendations.

Three recommendations were implemented. There were two parts of the Auditor General’s 2014 recommendations where more work is needed:

- Alberta Health Services still needs to put a system in place to mitigate the risk of facilities being unable to provide the staff necessary for safe, quality resident care
- Alberta Health still needs to improve its public reporting on the long-term care system

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NOTE:

- Both reports are available online at oag.ab.ca
- See Backgrounder for additional information on key findings and recommendations
- Related Reports:
 - [Seniors Care and Programs](#) (May 2005)
 - [Seniors Care in Long-term Care Facilities Follow-up](#) (October 2014)
 - [Better Healthcare for Albertans](#) (May 2017)
 - [At A Glance](#) (summary document)

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