

October 22, 2020

Ministry of Long-Term Care Updates Residents' Absence Policies

Dear Residents and Long-Term Care Team Members,

With the rise in numbers of COVID-19 cases in Ontario the past few weeks, government has revised the existing visiting policy that provides direction around residents leaving their long-term care home property. Effective on October 16th, the new policy states that **ALL non-medical absences must be approved by the home**. This is a shift, in that prior to this change, short-term absences did not require the approval of the home. Now they do.

The policy gives details for three specific types of absences; short-term, temporary, medical.

- 1) **Short term absences** are for social or other reasons that do not include an overnight stay. A request must be submitted to and approved by the home in advance of the absence, and residents are to be given a medical mask and reminded of the importance of infection protection and control measures including physical distancing and hand washing. When residents come back, they must be actively screened but they do not have to be tested nor self-isolate.
- 2) **Temporary absences** are for social or other reasons that include one or more overnights. A request must be submitted to and approved by the home. In this case, when residents return, they must be actively screened AND self-isolate for 14 days.
- 3) **Medical absences** are for medical reasons (e.g. Outpatient visit or a single night emergency room visit). Homes are not permitted to deny a resident's request to leave the home for medical visits and returning residents do not require testing or self-isolation.

If the home is in outbreak, or if the home is located in an area where there is evidence of widespread community transmission (as per provincial direction), absences are not permitted except for medical or compassionate reasons. Currently as of October 21st, 2020, areas with higher community spread are Ottawa, Toronto, Region of Peel, and York Region.

You may have some specific scenarios or questions come to mind that require clarity. With this new change, government has released a [Frequently Asked Questions \(FAQ\)](#) document that provides answers to a few questions including:

- 1) Question: Can a resident if they are able, leave on a short term or temporary absence independently?

Answer: Yes, residents who are capable, may leave independently, provided that the home has approved the request. An 'escort' or companion is not required.

- 2) Question: How can homes protect the roommates of residents who go out for short term absences and are not required to self-isolate upon their return?

Answer: While a resident is on a short-term absence, they must be provided with a medical mask that must be worn at all times (if tolerated) and reminded about the importance of public health measures including physical distancing and avoiding large gatherings/parties. This is intended to reduce the risk of COVID-19. Once the resident returns to the home, he/she must be actively screened which included taking temperature at least twice per day, assessing for fever, cough and other symptoms of COVID-19. In addition, homes should allow for physical distancing and mask wearing indoors as routine precautionary measures.

- 3) Question: Is the resident required to keep a log of where they go and who they come in contact with while on a short term or temporary absence?

Answer: Residents and/or their substitute-decision makers are not required to maintain a log of the residents' whereabouts during an absence. However, licensees should record all resident absences.

- 4) Question: If a resident becomes symptomatic after returning to the home from an absence, how should the home respond?

Answer: Any resident with symptoms must be isolated and tested for COVID-19. If the resident receives a positive result, the home should follow the appropriate measures (as per government Directive #3) and contact the local public health unit to describe the situation. That local public health unit will provide further direction, which may involve contact tracing, but not necessarily.

- 5) Question: If a resident has returned from a temporary absence, does their roommate also need to self-isolate for 14 days?

Answer: No. The home should have a self-isolation area ready to receive the resident upon their return. Approval for the temporary absence may very well depend on the home's ability to provide self-isolation for the returning resident i.e. if the home cannot provide self-isolation upon return, that may be grounds for denying the request for the temporary absence.

- 6) Question: Can residents go on planned recreational outings as part of the home's programming and are there limits to how many residents may participate at a time?

Answer: Residents may leave the home's property on a short term absence for social or other non-medical reasons, including recreational outings and approved by the home. Medical masks must be provided and worn at all times (if tolerated) and residents should be reminded about the importance of all other infection protection and control measures (physical distancing, washing hands, symptom screening).

Government restrictions on the number of people who can gather socially apply, depending on the nature of the outing (eg. Unsupervised social gatherings).

Other key points found in the FAQ document include:

- Access to the contact information for all Public Health Units for the province. Residents, if you are curious about the advice given to your home or wish to have clarification, you certainly can call the Public Health Unit responsible for your area. (This information is found in question 15).
- When residents return from a medical absence, they are not required to be tested or to self-isolate. If homes wish to impose additional requirement above and beyond those provided by government (in Directive #3) for residents returning from absences, they should seek their own legal advice.

This information was communicated by government through a memo from Sheila Bristo, Assistant Deputy Minister, LTC Operations Division, Ministry of LTC, and two other documents; COVID-19 Directive #3, and the Frequently Asked Questions Document.

These 3 documents can be read in full by clicking on the links below:

- **ADM Memo:** <https://www.ltchomes.net/LTCHPORTAL/Content/Snippets/ADM Memo Absences.pdf>
- **COVID-19 Directive #3:** <https://www.ltchomes.net/LTCHPORTAL/Content/Snippets/Directive%203%20-%20Oct%2014,%202020.pdf>
- **FAQ: Resident Absences from Long-Term Care Homes:** <https://www.ltchomes.net/LTCHPORTAL/Content/Snippets/FAQs Absences.pdf>

I wish to extend my sincere thanks to our LTC Communities across Ontario; the brave, dedicated, and committed team members, residents, and family members. Everyone has a part to play in providing safe, inspired, healthy and informed homes in which people live, work and visit. Be well.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dee Lender". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Dee Lender
Executive Director, OARC