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April 13, 2021

Fiona Lewis, Chair, Health Advocacy Committee, and
Michael Crawford, President
BC Association of Social Workers
402 – 1755 West Broadway
Vancouver BC V6J 4S5

Dear Ms. Lewis and Mr. Crawford:

Thank you for your letter of January 14, 2021 to the Honourable Adrian Dix, Minister of Health, regarding the recent Office of the Seniors Advocate report, Staying Apart to Stay Safe. I have been asked to respond on the Minister's behalf and I apologize for the delay.

As you know, the Ministry of Health's (the Ministry) response to the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic has evolved based on evidence, new understanding of the disease, and updated national and international guidelines and research. In the early stages of the pandemic response in March 2020, the Provincial Health Officer (PHO) ordered all long term care (LTC) homes and assisted living (AL) residences to restrict visitors to essential visits only. The order was put in place to protect residents and staff, and reduce the likelihood of a COVID-19 outbreak.

The Province's COVID-19 Immunization Plan prioritized the residents in LTC and AL, and their essential visitors, with the first doses of the vaccine in BC. As per the Ministry's recent announcement, more flexibility in social visits came into effect on April 1, 2021 (<https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2021HLTH0022-000551>).

Updates include:

- Removing the requirement for a single designated social visitor to allow additional visitors;
- Expanding the number of visitors within a visit to up to two adults and one child, allowing people to connect in small groups;
- Changing the allowable location so that visits may occur in the resident's room; and
- Allowing physical touch between visitors and residents, provided appropriate infection prevention and control measures – such as masks and hand hygiene are in place.

An updated guidance document is available on the British Columbia Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) website: <http://www.bccdc.ca/health-professionals/clinical-resources/covid-19-care/clinical-care/long-term-care-facilities-assisted-living>. I encourage you to review the guidance document for the most up-to-date information on visitation.

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In January 2021, the Ministry and BCCDC released a guidance document titled ***Overview of Visitors in Long-Term Care and Seniors' Assisted Living*** intended to support a consistent approach to visits that enables person-centred care: http://www.bccdc.ca/Health-Info-Site/Documents/Visitors_Long-Term_Care_Seniors_Assisted_Living.pdf. The guidance document was updated in February 2021 to include the appeal process and again recently to reflect the changes that took effect April 1, 2021.

As we move forward with the updated visitation guidelines, the appeal process continues to be in place to ensure fair and consistent decision making. Visitors can request an immediate review of any decisions made related to visitor status. The appeal process is accessible, detailed and unbiased. An appeal initiates at the facility level, can be routed up to the health authority, Patient Care Quality Office and, when needed, to the PHO for final resolution.

Following the approval of rapid point-of-care tests by the Federal Government in October 2020, British Columbia moved quickly to validate and pilot the use of rapid tests in several settings, including LTC. Going forward, rapid point-of-care testing in British Columbia will be used in community settings, places where rapid COVID-19 test results are needed to guide immediate public health action, and for screening in settings with increased risk of transmission, including in LTC and AL facilities. For more information on the use of rapid point-of-care testing in British Columbia please go to: <http://www.bccdc.ca/health-info/diseases-conditions/covid-19/testing/rapid-covid-19-point-of-care-screening-program>

The province supports the creation and operation of family councils in LTC through provincial regulation. **Section 59** of the ***Residential Care Regulation*** requires the operator of a LTC home to provide an opportunity for persons in care, representatives, and family, to establish one or more councils to represent the interests of persons in care. In regards to family and/or resident councils within the province: over 90% of LTC homes and approximately 56% of publicly-funded AL residences have a council in place.

The Ministry has previously engaged with the Vancouver Island Association of Family Councils to assess options for enhancing the role of family councils.

The Seniors Services Branch is dedicated to policies and programs addressing health care and social needs of seniors in BC. The Seniors Advocate and her staff meet regularly with the Ministry of Health to bring forward concerns and propose solutions. As we enter the next phase of the pandemic, we hope our resources can be shifted towards increased stakeholder engagement, foundational policy updates, and new initiatives.

Thank you for your letter. I appreciate the opportunity to respond.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K Fisher', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Kiersten Fisher
Executive Director
Seniors Services Branch
Health Services Division

pc: Isobel MacKenzie, Office of the Seniors Advocate
Mable Elmore, MLA, Parliamentary Secretary for Seniors' Services and Long-Term Care