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Congregate Care groups plead with residents to stay vigilant

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The Congregate Care Settings Group of Dufferin and Caledon, like all members of the community, have felt the draining impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic for the last 13 months.

They know it's been the hardest year of everybody's lives, but they want to encourage people to continue to do their party to keep the community safe.

The group is made up of Abbeyfield Caledon, Bethell Hospice, Boston Mills Retirement Community, Caledon Community Services, Choices Youth Shelter, Community Living Dufferin, Dufferin Area Family Health Team, Dufferin Child and Family Services, Dufferin Oaks Long Term Care Home, Family Transition Place, Hospice Dufferin, Kerry's Place, Lord Dufferin Centre, Oliver House, Pine River Institute, Shelburne Long Term Care Home and Retirement Community, SHIP, and South Bridges Care Community.

Seeing firsthand how difficult it has been, together the Congregate Care Settings Group of Dufferin and Caledon penned an open letter to residents pleading that despite pandemic fatigue, the third wave is no time to stop doing what must be done to save lives.

?We have all heard the tragic stories of the front lines of health care?we know of the unprecedented exhaustion, pressure and trauma that nurses, doctors, paramedics, environmental services staff and allied health professionals are coping with,? the letter reads. ?The pressures on the health care system are enormous. What may not be as obvious, is the crisis unfolding within congregate (communal living) settings. Congregate care settings are organizations that house some of our community's most vulnerable people. This letter is being sent on behalf of a group of leaders of our community's congregate settings on behalf of those we serve.

?The pandemic has demonstrated once again that those most at risk in our community for contracting the virus are often the same people who are most at risk for?everything else. They are the marginalized, the disenfranchised, the homeless, the disabled, the elderly and ill. They are children and youth in transition or living with neglect or abuse. They are individuals who are differently abled or struggling with mental health, and those using substances to cope. They are women at risk, locked down in their own homes with an abusive partner. They are essential workers in grocery stores, warehouses and manufacturing facilities who don't have sick benefits and don't have the social capital or support to refuse unsafe work during this pandemic. These are the people we serve and care for. They are the reason that we are awake in the middle of the night?hoping we can keep our respective facilities and services free from an outbreak?while we track daily case counts and trends, which can make us feel anything but hopeful.

?For the past year, at a minimum of twice per week, this group of leaders from our community's congregate care settings have been meeting?virtually, of course?as the pandemic has unfolded and evolved. The organizations represented at this virtual table shoulder a unique burden. We continue to work to keep the people we support safe from the risks they face in their everyday lives. We are now also working to mitigate the added risk of contracting the virus while living communally within the walls of our organizations. Over the past year, our work has changed. It had to. Not only have we had to learn, develop and implement new infection, prevention, and control protocols and to work together while wearing face masks and eye protection, but in order to effectively protect the people we support as well as our staff, we have had to adapt our facilities and service delivery. We can't give up or relax our steadfast vigilance. We are responsible for the safety and well-being of too many.

?Our fears are many, but one of the greatest is that our staff will get sick and be unable to care for people living in our organizations and accessing our services. We fear that if even one of the people we support becomes infected, the virus may spread, infecting other residents as well as our staff. We fear that if that happens, we won't have the resources we need to care for people in the way they need to be cared for. However, the biggest fear we have right now is that the more tired, frustrated, and angry we all become, the less

willing any of us are to follow the rules. We know, however, that in not doing so, we will be condemning ourselves to a fourth wave and maybe a fifth of this pandemic. We want our work to be all about caring for the people we support and their families. We want to be able to do this in the way we know they need it?face-to-face, in-person and with unreserved compassion. We know the demand for our services isn't going anywhere but up?even when the pandemic is long behind us?so we are holding out hope. We have to. It was Mahatma Ghandi who said, ?a nation's greatness is measured by how it treats its weakest members.' We believe in the greatness of our community, which is why we are asking for your help.

?We are asking you to dig in. To dig deeper. Despite being tired and frustrated, please consider your actions and the impact they may have on people who may not have the same resources and privileges that you do. Please help us protect the most vulnerable people in our community. Stay home as much as you can. Wear a mask. When it's your turn, get vaccinated. By doing so you are helping us save lives.?

Norah Kennedy, a member of the group and the Executive Director of Family Transition Place?a shelter for women who experience abuse and unhealthy relationship?said she drafted the letter on behalf of the group with the goal of helping people understand how critical the situation is for these organizations.

?We've been meeting since the beginning of the pandemic a couple times a week because we're representatives of different organizations that are being referred to as congregate settings,? she said. ?We've been effected by the pandemic in a really specific and different way because though we're very different organizations and settings?everything from long-term care to shelters for abuse?but the thing that we really share in common is the fact that we're housing and sheltering really vulnerable people in close proximity. We know what happened back in the first wave with long-term care and retirement homes and how the virus swept through those facilities. We know what the risk can be and so, on our calls, we talk about what the issues are, what the trends are, what our concerns are, and how to mitigate them.?

The restrictions and directives in place for congregated setting on how to keep people safe are extremely detailed and that has caused these organizations to shift from dealing only with the issues involving their clients to how to serve them in the safest possible way, says Kennedy.

?We're changing how our facilities operate and how our services operate so we're still giving them the support that they need, but trying to keep them safe from another danger,? she said. ?In my situation, safety has always been our number one concern at the shelter, but now we're adding the?increase of safety with health.?

With all the effort put forth by these organizations to keep their clients safe, Kennedy says they were motivated to let the community know that their help is still needed to protect those who need it the most.

?What triggered the letter was a conversation we had a couple of weeks ago around how tired our staff are, how hard this has been for all of us, and yet we keep stepping up and trying to remain optimistic,? she said. ?We're really proud of the fact that the outbreaks in congregate settings?especially in our region?are actually really low. But we just wanted the opportunity to let the community know that everybody's actions, everybody's individual choices, have an impact on other people.

?Our point is that the people we're sheltering, and housing are some of the most vulnerable people in our community. These are the people that are going to be the most at risk in so many other things in normal times. As we've seen across the globe, the pandemic is hitting those communities that have been marginalized the hardest. It was an opportunity to ask the people of the community to look at the better side of their nature because we all know how tired and fed up we are and we all want to be out there with people again, but we need people to recognize the most vulnerable don't have the same opportunities that many of us do. We believe as a group that it's part of our responsibility to protect and care for those people in any way we can.?

Kennedy says she worries people forget how poor choices in the community can lead to major impacts, especially on those without the same privileges that are more vulnerable, when relaxing around COVID restrictions.

?Most of the time people want to contribute to the common good and we're right there with everybody, we're tired and tired of having to be screened and putting on the masks and goggles,? she said. ?We all want to get back to barbecues with our families as the weather gets nice, but every time we take that risk, we convince ourselves that it's not us that it's going to happen to, it's somebody else and we'll be fine.

?Every time we take that risk, on the off chance we're not fine, that has a huge ripple effect. If one of my staff or a client comes in contact with somebody spreading it, that's just not one person, that's them, their family, all the clients they're in contact with, the whole staff, and their families. The ripple effect is not worth it for the brief moment of fun.?