

Patients died from neglect, not COVID-19, in Ontario LTC homes, military report finds: 'All they needed was water and a wipe down'

[Karen Howlett](#) Published May 9, 2021

A Canadian military report details numerous issues at several Ontario long term care homes, including the Hawthorne Place Care Centre in Toronto, Ont., photographed on May 26, 2020.

Fred Lum/the Globe and Mail

Dozens of residents in two Ontario nursing homes hit hard by the coronavirus died not from [COVID-19](#) but from dehydration and neglect, the Canadian military says in reports obtained by The Globe and Mail.

The documents contain new details about the deplorable conditions in two Toronto homes before the Forces stepped in last year, revealing for the first time that causes other than COVID-19 hastened the deaths of residents as outbreaks spiralled out of control and staffing collapsed.

At Downsview Long Term Care Centre, where one in four residents succumbed to the virus, another 26 died from dehydration before a military team arrived last June to provide humanitarian and medical support.

At Hawthorne Place Care Centre, 51 residents died of COVID-19 in the 269-bed facility. The military says it suspects those fatalities pale in comparison to deaths from other causes. "Residents are dying from non-COVID-19 causes more than they should be."

The allegation of deaths because of dehydration is "not only troubling but potentially criminal," Amber Irwin, a spokeswoman for Long-Term Care Minister Merrilee Fullerton, said in an e-mail on Sunday.

According to figures published by the provincial government, 3,762 long-term care residents in Ontario have died of COVID-19. But no one is tracking the number of fatalities from other causes during the pandemic.

The reports on Downsview and Hawthorne were submitted to the independent commission that examined the devastating impact of the coronavirus on residents in long-term care homes but have not been made public.

The three-member commission, led by retired associate chief justice Frank Marrocco, criticized the Ontario government's response to the pandemic, saying in its report released on April 30 that it was "slow, unco-ordinated and lacking in urgency."

The government did not ask the military for help in seven homes until the coronavirus was already tearing through the facilities, leaving them without enough staff to stabilize the "increasingly dire situation," the commission says in its report.

The report quotes from Ms. Fullerton's notebook dated April 17, 2020: "Military plan needed, get them in within 24-48 hours ... homes spiral down quickly."

However, it would be another 12 days before the military was deployed to the first five homes, including Hawthorne Place, at the request of [Premier Doug Ford](#). "This delay – like others before it – was tragic for those trapped in homes with uncontrolled outbreaks," the commission says in its report.

The military arrived at two other homes, including Downsview Long Term Care Centre, in early June.

In its report on the Downsview long-term care home, the military expresses "large concern" with the timing of its arrival. "It was noted by ACCT [the augmented civilian care team] that 26 residents died due to dehydration

prior to the arrival of the CAF team due to the lack of staff to care for them. They died when all they need was 'water and a wipe down.' "

James Balcom, chief operating officer of GEM Health Care Group, a Halifax-based company that owns the for-profit home, said company officials began pleading for extra provincial support with staffing at Downsview in late April of last year.

"It is tragic," he said in an e-mail to The Globe, that emergency help from the Armed Forces and a Toronto hospital did not come until weeks later.

Sixty-five residents of Downsview died of COVID-19 last spring, ranking the home the third-hardest hit in Ontario.

"We will always grieve for those who died last year," said Mr. Balcom, adding that the home now has a new senior management team. "We never want anyone – residents, family members and staff – to experience what happened at Downsview and across the province last year."

At Hawthorne Place, residents have died because of dehydration and malnourishment, the military says. When members of the Armed Forces arrived at the home, the report says, they found "feces and vomit" on the floors and walls, two residents with dried feces under their fingernails and management that was "non-existent."

Contrary to the report, a spokeswoman for Responsive Group Inc., the company that manages the for-profit home, said management was present in Hawthorne at all times. Nicola Major also said, in an e-mail to The Globe, that the military did not bring any issues contained in the Hawthorne report to the attention of management. As well, she said, none of the death certificates issued for residents cite neglect, dehydration or malnutrition as a cause of death.

Ms. Irwin, the minister's spokeswoman, said Ms. Fullerton received the

reports on Downsview and Hawthorne last Thursday, and ministry staff met with officials in the Office of the Chief Coroner the following day to discuss the revelations.

“The coroner’s office is engaged and will be providing the ministry with their documents about deaths in the homes,” Ms. Irwin said. “Once those documents have been received, the ministry will be acting on them.”

The coroner’s office declined to comment.

In a [report released last May](#), the military chronicled horrific conditions in the initial five homes it assisted, ranging from poor infection-control practices to the neglect and abuse of residents.

Opposition Leader Andrea Horwath wrote to the Ontario Provincial Police last week, asking it to review whether the commission’s findings “constitute a case for criminal charges.”

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