

Ontario Senior Pride News Release Dec.21, 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic has been especially hard on Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Transgender and Queer (2S-LGBTQ+) seniors in long term care homes, an ad-hoc committee of seven organizations has told Ontario's Long Term Care COVID-19 Commission. In a face-to-face, online meeting on December 18, three representatives of Ontario Senior Pride told the Commissioners that 2S-LGBTQ+ residents and staff experience discrimination every day in many LTC institutions, and the isolation they experience because of the current pandemic makes the situation worse. If they also belong to Indigenous, Black, South Asian, East Asian, Southeast Asian, Latinx, and other BIPOC communities, or are Francophone, they may suffer even more.

Tom Warner (he/him) of Toronto, Ashley Di Benedetto (she/her) of North Bay and Barbara Freeman (she/her) of Ottawa explained to the Commissioners that many 2S-LGBTQ+ residents in LTC are reluctant to come out to the administrators and caregivers. They are afraid the staff will abuse, isolate or neglect them if they are open about their sexual orientation, or gender identity, or complain about their treatment. Outbreaks of COVID-19 in LTC homes are highlighting the long-standing, systemic discrimination within the LTC system that results in many unaddressed issues, inequities and failures in the quality and kind of care provided to 2S-LGBTQ+ residents, Warner said.

The current restrictions are especially difficult because LTC homes allow only blood family members, or caregivers with power of attorney, rather than chosen family to visit the residents. In one case, Di Benedetto said, a gay man died alone during COVID-19 because his LTC home forbade his supportive friend to visit or contact him, as she had done regularly before the pandemic. She learned of his death only a few days later from a sympathetic, gay staff member. The residents should have the right to choose someone other than a blood relative to be their visiting care person, Di Benedetto said, including their same-sex partners or friends.

Freeman emphasized to the Commissioners the importance of *compulsory* sensitivity training for administrators, staff, family council members and volunteers in LTC homes that address the particular health problems of 2S-LGBTQ+ residents, and counter prejudicial attitudes, including those based on any form of religious belief. The emphasis in this ongoing training must be on compassion, care, understanding and respect for these residents, and a more accepting attitude toward 2S-LGBTQ+ staff as well.

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The member organizations of The Ontario Senior Pride Ad-Hoc Committee are:

- Aging with Pride Waterloo-Wellington
- New Horizons 2S-LGBTQ+ Seniors Program in North Bay (program housed out of The AIDS Committee of North Bay and Area, with chapters in the Barrie and Sudbury regions)
- Ottawa Senior Pride Network
- Rainbow Faith and Freedom
- Senior Pride Network Niagara
- Senior Pride Network Toronto
- Windsor Pride Community.