

Ombudsman Report: Caring in Crisis

Saskatchewan – Today saw the release of the Saskatchewan Ombudsman’s report on the fatal COVID-19 outbreak at the Extencicare Parkside special care home in late 2020. SEIU-West extends its most sincere sympathies to all who lost a loved one living there, or in any of our province’s long-term care facilities, to COVID-19. SEIU-West also expresses outrage at the degree of mismanagement which, as documented in the report, resulted in the deaths of dozens of seniors at Parkside.

“This report is heartbreaking to read,” says SEIU-West President Barb Cape. “The residents and families of Parkside suffered so much. The staff struggled mightily to care for them as the outbreak got worse. And the report makes abundantly clear: they were all failed by the three organizations that were supposed to protect them: Extencicare Canada, the Saskatchewan Health Authority (SHA), and the Ministry of Health.

As detailed clearly in the Ombudsman’s report, Extencicare, the SHA and then-Minister of Health Jim Reiter knew as early as April 2020 that a COVID-19 outbreak could pose significant life-threatening challenges in Parkside.

“The scale of this tragedy was ultimately not due to COVID. It was due to a lack of leadership,” explains Cape. “Parkside is an Extencicare facility, but Extencicare doesn’t bear the sole responsibility for what happened here. The report states clearly that the Minister of Health is ultimately responsible for long-term care in Saskatchewan. The Ministry and the SHA simply did not provide the necessary support, communication, or oversight.”

“When the COVID outbreak hit Parkside in November 2020, the workers at Parkside were already exhausted and doing their best with the few tools they had been given. Community spread was already rampant across the province at that point, despite the Premier’s persistent downplaying of the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Among the report’s more shocking findings:

- The Ministry of Health and SHA do not set or enforce clear, universal, acceptable care-related standards for long-term care home operators; there are merely a vague set of “program guidelines” for special care homes (p. 44 & 47)
- By fall 2020, Paul Merriman’s Ministry and SHA officials were well aware that Parkside was not ready to manage a serious COVID-19 outbreak...but did nothing; (p. 57)
- The Sask Party government has known for at least a decade that the Parkside facility was in an unhealthy and substandard condition... but did nothing (p. 58);

“This report corroborates the stories of fear, stress and anxiety reported by SEIU-West members at Parkside and all staff of Saskatchewan’s long-term care system” says Cape. “It validates years of our advocacy work raising longstanding issues.

“If Premier Scott Moe and his government do not address the root problems that caused this tragedy, including the working conditions in those facilities, nothing is going to change. That is a risk we cannot afford to take—and that the people of Saskatchewan should not accept.”

Service Employees International Union West (SEIU-West) represents over 13,000 people across Saskatchewan. They include people who work in health care, education, municipalities, community-based organizations, retirement homes and other sectors. They are joined by one colour – purple – and one union – SEIU-West. Visit PurpleWorks.ca to find out more about SEIU-West members.

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For more information or interviews (Barb Cape has availability today between noon and 1PM and 3PM onward), contact:

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