

Québec's Story

Long-term care in Québec made national headlines in mid-April 2020 when reporter Aaron Derfel of the Montreal Gazette published shocking revelations about COVID-19 at Résidence Herron, a private 134-bed facility in Dorval. Public health workers called into the institution found it almost unstaffed. Residents were hungry, dehydrated, and disorientated, some lay covered with urine and feces. A number of residents were dying of COVID or already dead. Government investigation established that although there had been COVID at Herron since mid-March, protocols for halting the spread of infection had not been followed. In total, 61 people died at the facility over the course of the outbreak, a 44% mortality rate.

But Herron wasn't the only location where Québec's residential eldercare system fell apart during the first wave of the pandemic. Overwhelmed by the spread of COVID through a health care sector ill-prepared to contain the disease or deal with its victims, the provincial government called in the military in late April 2020 to help at 28 of the worst-hit facilities. By September Québec had recorded 4,600 care home deaths, much higher than Ontario's 2,800 and BC's 140. In contrast to Ontario, where resident deaths were clearly higher in for-profit facilities, most of Québec long-term care COVID victims died in public CHSLDs. This statistic reflects the fact that nearly 90% of Québec's care homes are public facilities, but it also underscores the profound failure of its provincial state to safeguard the health of vulnerable dependent elders in a time of crisis.

The province of Québec has been notable within Canada for substantive investigations into these failures of state and society. Nora Loreto is an independent journalist based



in Québec City. From the first outbreak, she made it her personal pandemic mission to provide a daily internet tally of the mounting deaths in residential care. The Québec Ombudsperson's December 2020 and November 2021 reports stressed the urgent need for change in a sector where care workers are underpaid and unacknowledged and elders are not treated with the dignity and respect that is their due. Criticisms of Québec's residential facilities and public health agencies included: unfamiliarity with infection prevention and control, prioritization of hospitals over care homes, lack of PPE, inhumane treatment of residents and family/friend caregivers, and multiple issues related to staffing, poor inter-sector communication and obsolete data collection. Then in May 2022 Québec Coroner Géhane Kamel released a scathing study with 23 recommendations that included a "déprivatisation du système" and a shift to enhanced support of home care over institutional provision. Hauntingly, witnesses giving evidence revealed that an unknown number of resident deaths during the crisis were likely caused – not by COVID – but by starvation, dehydration, or sedation with morphine. It is certain that these tragic humanitarian failures will be an important chapter in future pandemic histories of Québec.