

My mother, 91 years old, is a resident at Providence Care, Sandusky, where visitation has been VERY limited. It's my understanding Providence' policy will not permit visitation if there is one case of COVID among staff or residents. When visitation is allowed, it is 6 feet apart with a mask and a shield which makes conversation with our hearing impaired mother difficult at best. The visits become very frustrating for all of us.

Also, just for the purpose of background information, mom survived Covid last August and had both of her vaccines by the second week of January but we're still unable to touch her or cone within 6' of her.

Our family is concerned not just for our mother, but for all of the residents in every nursing home across the state. Mental health is just as important as physical health. And in our mother's case and probably many others, she's starting to fail both physically and mentally.

I've attached an article highlighting our mother that recently appeared in our local newspaper, the Sandusky Register. I hope you'll take the time to read it and then I'm asking you to take it a step further and be their advocate. The families want to not only visit with their loved ones, but we want to be able to hug them - and not just on their death bed. Families are willing to be screened/tested. Please help us put policy in place that will allow family members inside the nursing home with their loved ones, touching them - just like the staff hugs them today. If athletes can be tested to play sports, why can't we be tested to see our loved ones?

I've read HB770 and I'm not confident that it goes far enough. My understanding is there has to be a special circumstance in order for the resident to have a compassionate caregiver. Instead, each resident should be allowed one person under any circumstance, as long as the caregiver has a negative COVID test.

Please help the families. Help the residents!

Thank you for your time and I look forward to hearing from you,

Brenda Ried
419-357-3672

No visitation allowed

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Andy Ouriel

SANDUSKY - On the surface, it's a simple request most anyone could empathize with.

Though, with each passing day, the situation only grows more complicated, causing heartache for both Brenda Ried and Dorothy Miller.

Miller, 91, resides at Providence Care Center, a nursing home on Hayes Avenue (Ohio 4). The longtime Margareta Township resident has stayed at the nursing home near Sandusky High School for the past three years.

Up until a year ago, Ried, her daughter, frequently visited with Miller, getting to touch, hug and kiss her without any limitations or repercussions.

But, today, those expressions of love can't happen - and haven't for about a year.

"Traditional" in-person visits between the two, altogether eliminating human touch, immediately stopped on March 19, 2020, coinciding right about when Ohio's stay-at-home orders went into effect. Simultaneously, nursing homes underwent lockdown procedures.

Through creative measures, think window visits along with phone calls, Ried still maintains a strong level of communication with Miller. She's also visited, though infrequently, and must keep a safe distance and wear personal protective equipment, like a surgical mask paired with a shield.

"Staff can touch mom, hug her, but we can't go within 6 feet of her? What makes the staff so safe?" said Ried, who backed up her comments and underscored her deep appreciation for those taking care of Miller and other Providence residents.

She isn't selfish: Ried knows, when the pandemic reaches critical points, staff needs to protect residents at all costs, even if it means temporarily barring loved ones from the facility. This included a period back in August when Providence battled an outbreak with more than 100 cases.

And she's willing to take any COVID-19-related screening or test - just like Providence staff and selective other personnel, like chaplains, do - to prove she's healthy enough to enter.

But Providence's parent organization won't give her, or any other relative or residents there, such an opportunity, a common occurrence taking place today at many other Ohio-based nursing homes and assisted living facilities.

The decision puzzles Ried, when considering these factors:

- Recent trends, both statewide and locally, show COVID-19 caseloads steadily decreasing. On Tuesday, Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine reported 3,657 new cases in the state versus a 21-day average of 5,228.
- Erie County is home to 11 certified nursing homes and assisted living facilities. As of Thursday, some allow visitations and others don't, as outlined on the Ohio Department of Health's Long-Term Care Facility Visitation Dashboard.

To Ried, and many others experiencing a similar issue with a family member, it just doesn't make sense.

"She wants to be with her family and friends," Ried said of Miller. "She is ready to die and has said that so many times. Who has the right to tell her that isolation is the 'right' thing for her? The residents' mental health is just as important as their physical health. Their mental health is deteriorating because they are isolated. Everyone deserves a choice in how they live their life."

The life of Dorothy Miller

Up until this past year, Miller, a 1947 Margaretta High School graduate, lived the life she wanted - a proud and fulfilling one at that, said Ried, one of her four children.

- Her home life: Married to her late husband, Curtis Miller, who died in 2012, she also has 10 grandchildren and 14 great-grandchildren.
- Her work life: For many years, she worked for Sandusky Schools as a bus aide, transporting those with developmental disabilities.
- Her faith life: Known for her love of God, she worshiped at Trinity Lutheran Church in the Sandusky-area Venice neighborhood.

- Her personal life: She excelled in dartball, enjoyed games at the Erie County Senior Center and just loved having fun.

Knowing she's a jubilant soul who thrives in social situations, Providence's decision to confine Miller from the outside world is devastating, Ried said.

"Mom is a very social, fun-loving person with a strong faith," Ried said. "She's not afraid to die, but while she's here, on this earth, she wants to live."

The local response

After interviewing Ried, the Register relayed her concerns and asked several questions to Providence's parent company, Catholic Health Initiatives Living Communities.

It also manages The Commons of Providence, on Sandusky's west end near The Original Margaritaville, which, today, does allow for visitations by family members, inside or outside, according to the state.

Among the questions asked:

- What is the criteria Providence Care Center uses to determine visitation?
- Why is Providence Care Center's visitor policy more restrictive than others in the area?

Rather than directly answering these two questions, spokeswoman Christine Wasserman provided a general statement on its operations.

The organization's "No. 1 priority is protecting the health of our residents," Wasserman said.

Back in March, when the pandemic first started, more than 140 people lived at Providence.

"Given the high-risk population we serve, CHI Living Communities has put into place and continues numerous measures to help prevent and reduce the spread of the coronavirus."

Wasserman did specifically mention disinfecting all areas, stressing mask-wearing and hand-washing; screening employees; monitoring residents' conditions; and providing staff with personal protective equipment.

She also provided a direct response to this question: "Do you understand the plight of families who have relatives in Providence who have not been able to speak with their loved ones face-to-face?"

"Our team is acutely aware of how the pandemic may affect residents, their loved ones and our employees and continues to offer a myriad (of) services and compassionate support to assist them through this difficult time," Wasserman said.

The state response - and the final word

The Register also sent a similarly structured message to the Ohio Department of Health.

But those inquiries placed a greater emphasis on why nursing homes themselves, and not the state public health agency, is determining who can visit these facilities and who cannot.

It also stressed why a lone family representative - in Miller's case, Ried - can't be appointed to go inside a nursing home, and, for instance, hug a loved one so long as that person gets screened and undergoes testing, which would come back negative for COVID-19.

While department spokeswoman Tessie Pollock acknowledged the predicament families face, she, too, mostly sidestepped from directly answering the open-ended questionnaire.

"Because we don't yet know if people who are vaccinated against COVID-19 illness are still carriers of the virus, it's important to continue prevention measures and to protect those who can't get the vaccine," Pollock said. "We know the COVID-19 public health emergency has been very difficult on residents of long-term care facilities."

But does she truly, Ried wondered aloud.

"We want the decision-makers to include the families and the residents in their decision-making process," Ried said. "Give us and them a choice in how they live what's left of their lives."