

B.C. SENIORS LIVING ASSOCIATION

L. Coonfer: Thank you and good morning, Mr. Chairperson and members of the select standing committee. My name is Lee Coonfer. I am the CEO of B.C. Seniors Living Association, and I'm very grateful for the opportunity to present before you today. I provided the committee with a short PowerPoint presentation, which my script should follow if I do my job properly.

In short, BCSLA represents the private pay seniors living operators in B.C. These communities range from large operators providing multiple levels of service to hundreds of residents to small community operators with fewer than 15 occupants. In total, we represent over 170 sites in B.C. That is inclusive of 16,500 units and over 3,000 direct employees, which doesn't include the multiple contracted services and suppliers. Of this group, 120 of these companies are also members of the B.C. Seniors Living Association as associates.

Our vision is to help create an environment in B.C. where private pay providers thrive and innovate to offer increasing diversity of choice in senior living. To this end, although we are private pay, we are a partner of the provincial government. Success in the private pay sector alleviates strains and pressures on a publicly funded system that is under more stress and will continue to be as we look ahead to the forecasted demand for seniors living in B.C. In real terms, the forecast increase in demand is over 35 percent in the next ten years.

Today we have private pay communities that have provided supply on contract to government to meet the subsidized and the publicly funded demand. Therefore, a hybrid system is a reality. As it stands, only the private pay sector has the ability to help the province meet this demand with a high-quality of supply. So yes, we are partners.

I deposited my initial presentation in the recycling bin, as things have changed dramatically very quickly due to COVID-19. COVID-19 has presented a new operating environment across all sectors, requiring new socializing norms and, in particular, government leadership.

In keeping with our commitment to be a collaborative partner with the government, a message we delivered to MLAs in Victoria at our inaugural MLA day, BCSLA has worked closely with the Ministries of Health and Housing, participating diligently in the COVID-19 working group with the Ministry of Health and participating on the reference group to help to administer the single-site order. These are just two examples.

In both of these cases, much time was needed for the private pay seniors living sector and government to get to know one another better. I'll be honest, the learning curve has been steeper on the government side. This is why we have made a strategic directional change for our organization to have a focus on advocacy. However, we have found ourselves in a position where our members have not been treated like partners, quite the opposite. A number of these cases are a product of simply needing to work together better, and I'm committed to doing that.

There are two areas, mind you, that I have a hard time understanding, and our members see as discriminatory, unfair and a punishment, to be frank. These two issues are the administration of the federally funded \$4 an hour pandemic pay and the consideration for compensation for the incremental costs of provincial health order compliance during COVID-19.

In both of these cases — although, collectively, we serve the same community cohort, and in some cases, provide the exact same services, utilizing the exact same labour pool — the private pay sector has been treated quite differently than the publicly funded sector.

To be specific, the \$4 an hour pandemic pay. When the federal government announced the funding for the \$4 an hour pandemic pay, the province followed up with the announcement on how they would administer these funds. It was only logical that the private pay providers of seniors living would assume that this applied to the whole sector. The reality we found is that it doesn't.

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Eligibility requires that in order for the employees to receive this hero pay, they needed to work at a publicly funded site. Even BCSLA members who operate publicly funded capacity on behalf of the province yet still had their private pay operations on the same site were told they were not eligible. Using this same logic, one would assume that, therefore, those exact same sites would not be eligible or be required to comply with the single-site order and all of the administrative costs and burdens of that.

To our surprise, we were told no. That part we are eligible for and are to be included in that. For \$4-an-hour pandemic pay, the labourer is mobile and will go to where the grass is greener. This announcement of eligibility for \$4 an hour on a publicly funded site has put tremendous pressure on our members to meet that \$4 an hour out of their own pocket just to keep up and to be treated fairly and equally as their colleagues who operate across the street.

Incremental cost recovery for provincial health order compliance. Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, it was brought to the attention of government by BCSLA, at the working group, that PHO compliance, although necessary and the right thing to do, is requiring operators to incur costs for PPEs, screening and other ancillary areas. B.C. care providers....

B. D'Eith (Chair): Lee, sorry to interrupt. You're out of time. So if you could wrap up, I'd appreciate it.

L. Coonfer: Okay. I was going to say that the publicly funded sites are still being considered for incremental cost compensation, yet the BCSLA was recently told that we are not.

I appreciate your time and attention to this. These are the two areas that are of specific concern for our members and a priority for us to get some, at least, discussion started. We have tried and to this point have failed. I appreciate your time. I am available for any questions. Thank you very much.

B. D'Eith (Chair): Thank you very much, Lee. We appreciate that.

Questions from members?

D. Barnett: I have a question for Lee, if I may. Lee, you talked about \$4 an hour of pandemic funding for health care workers and that the private sector was not included. Am I correct in understanding that this is from the federal government down to the provincial government to distribute?

L. Coonfer: Correct. It is a federally funded program that has been transferred to the province for them to administer.

D. Barnett: If I could just take another minute. There were no rules or regulations when the federal government gave the money to the provinces to distribute, were there?

L. Coonfer: There were broad guidelines, to my understanding, but no specific instructions. It was up to the province to administer it as they saw fit.

B. D'Eith (Chair): I'm not sure that's 100 percent accurate, just in terms of.... The program, obviously, was trying to take into account the fact that, particularly in Quebec and Ontario, there was a much greater impact of COVID-19. Obviously, that had a huge impact on the health care system. Of course, we prepared for it, but we were administering a program, I think, that had a national — and provincially, more of a central Canada — focus, I think. To be fair to that, I think the program was really focused on Canada generally and not B.C. specifically.

Any other questions or comments from members?

Seeing none, I wanted to thank the presenters. Thank you very much for your presentations. Thank you for everything you've done during the pandemic — and, Lee, for your participation in the COVID-19 consultations. We really appreciate that work — and of course, all the work that everyone has been doing in a very difficult time.