

POLITICS FEDERAL CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

Visit restrictions see 'desperate' families pull loved ones out of aged care

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By [Dana McCauley](#), [Judith Ireland](#) and [Robyn Grace](#)

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The peak body for aged care residents has cautioned against "blanket" restrictions on visits, warning more frustrated families will pull their loved ones out of care if providers do not exercise discretion while implementing new rules aimed at slowing the spread of the deadly coronavirus.

Council On The Ageing chief executive Ian Yates said "a small number" of families had grown "desperate" and taken residents out of aged care, blaming a lack of flexibility by providers that have banned visits and outings - and warning the trend would continue if new rules were not approached cautiously.



Aged care operators say residents' emotional health must be balanced with the coronavirus risk. VIRGINIA STAR

Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced on Wednesday aged care facilities must only allow short visits by a maximum of two people each day, in the resident's room - not in communal areas - and preferably without children, who could not be relied on to follow hygiene measures.

Mr Yates warned more elderly residents would be withdrawn from care by frustrated loved ones if providers were "unreasonable", saying spouses who routinely made all-day visits should be allowed to continue to do so in order to maintain residents' routines.

"Today, a facility told a resident they couldn't go out to a medical appointment," he said.

"These are the sort of things that are going to get families' backs up."

However, the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation on Wednesday called for a ban on all non-essential visits to "chronically understaffed" nursing homes to protect residents from the virus, saying it was "totally unrealistic" to expect facilities to supervise visits to limit their duration.

"Aged care staff are rushed off their feet trying to meet the basic needs of elderly residents," the union's acting secretary Lori-Anne Sharp said.

"Given we know that the vulnerable elderly are at far greater risk of mortality if they contract the virus, the government must immediately stop all non-essential visits to nursing homes to prevent the spread and ultimately more deaths."

A number of facilities had gone into lockdown since the outbreak of COVID-19, with aged care provider Regis the latest to impose a blanket ban on visitors at facilities nationwide from 5pm on Tuesday, even though it had no confirmed cases of COVID-19.

Aged and Community Services Australia chief executive Patricia Sparrow said it was important providers manage residents' mental health as social isolation measures were increased.

"At the top of our minds is the need to balance prevention with emotional care and compassion," she said.

Catholic Health Australia chief executive Pat Garcia said while the organisation accepted the new measures, its providers would "continue to allow residents managed access to their families, health professionals and anyone else deemed important to their lives".

"Elderly residents have a right to see their family or their priest and operators will continue to manage access on a case-by-case basis," Mr Garcia said.

Aged Care Minister Richard Colbeck said providers would be asked to ensure video calls were available to all residents to enable them to stay in contact with their loved ones.

"If you don't absolutely have to go to support a resident in care, please don't," he said.

The government's new rules mean all organised social activities and entertainment within aged care facilities, along with school group visits, will be cancelled.

Mr Morrison, whose elderly father died in January, said he knew the stricter measures "could be very difficult for families ... having been through this experience in my own family recently".

"It is about protecting the residents," he said.

Mr Morrison said loved ones wanting to visit aged care residents who were dying should be dealt with on a "facility by facility" basis.

Staff and visitors who have travelled overseas in the last 14 days, have been in contact with a confirmed COVID-19 case or have symptoms of an acute respiratory infection - including a cough, fever, sore throat or shortness of breath - must not be allowed into aged care centres.

Aged care staff must get their flu vaccines by May 1 to continue working.



Dana McCauley



Dana is health and industrial relations reporter for The Sydney Morning Herald and The Age.



Judith Ireland



Judith Ireland is a political reporter for the Sydney Morning Herald and The Age, based at Parliament House



Robyn Grace



Robyn Grace is a journalist at The Age.

