

# 'Extremely secretive': Families hit out as nursing home staff told to isolate

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July 22, 2020 – 8.01pm

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All staff at St Basil's Homes for the Aged in Fawkner have been ordered to vacate their positions and go into isolation, with some family members of residents distressed over the lack of communication as 69 COVID-19 cases were linked to the centre, in the worst aged care outbreak in the state.

The dramatic intervention came at 7am on Wednesday, as 383 positive COVID-19 cases were linked to 45 aged care facilities across the state.



Dimitra Elias, a resident at St Basil's Homes for the Aged in Fawkner.

Ellen Grouios, whose 80-year-old mother Dimitra Elias is in the memory-sensitive unit at St Basil's, accused the home of being "extremely secretive", saying she did not get a call to alert her to the outbreak of the deadly virus.

And Christine Golding, whose mother Efraxia is at St Basil's, said there had been "deathly silence" from the home.

"We have heard nothing, crickets as they say," Ms Golding said. "I don't know what's going on. My mother can't pick up the phone, she's in a wheelchair and they have put her in bed for a week. I can't even call her. It's appalling."



Christine Golding and her mother Efraxia at St Basil's.

The board of St Basil's Homes for the Aged said that as of Wednesday, the home would be overseen by replacement staff provided by the federal Health Department after 18 staff and 47 residents tested positive to COVID-19. A further four cases have also been linked to the centre.

"This action, while implemented with a heavy heart, is one that was directed by the Victorian public health experts, doctors themselves who have shown unconditional understanding and commitment, which will help us to overcome this difficult period," the board said in a statement.

It said residents who tested positive had been isolated and were being accommodated together in "COVID wings" to prevent further spread of the virus.

The board said regular staff who tested negative to the virus from July 26 would be allowed to return to their positions at St Basil's on July 30.





St Basil's Homes for the Aged in Fawkner. LUIS ENRIQUE ASCUI

Chairman of the board Kon Kontis did not return calls from *The Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald*. However, earlier this week he told Greek newspaper *Neos Kosmos*: "Many of those found positive to the virus are asymptomatic. Sadly, others presenting symptoms are not being accepted at hospitals."

Eight residents from St Basil's have been transferred to hospital.

"More will be transferred if necessary," a Victorian Department of Health and Human Services spokesman said.

More than 50 Victorian aged care residents have been transferred from aged care to hospital due to coronavirus outbreaks, the spokesman said.

Health officials are racing to contain the spiraling coronavirus outbreak in Victoria's aged care facilities.

Federal Aged Care Minister Richard Colbeck said residents would be transferred to hospital on a case-by-case basis following a clinical assessment and in line with each of their advanced care requirements.

"We need to ensure we respect the wishes of all residents," he said.

"The Commonwealth government is working closely with the facility, the Age Care Quality and Safety Commission, the Victorian government [Public Health Unit] and DHHS on the management of the facility."

Mr Colbeck said work was also under way to create clean cohorting zones within the facility, with a deep clean carried out on all vacant and vacated rooms.

He said a communications team had been appointed to provide information to family members.

Ms Grouios said she was alerted to the outbreak by a friend last week and got "brushed off" when she rang St Basil's, even though by this stage COVID-19 cases at the home were already being reported in the media.

"They were avoiding all questions," Ms Grouios said. "We don't know anything about the new staff coming in. It is a pandemic but it would be nice to be communicated with by the nursing home."

On Tuesday she received a phone call from a doctor who initially said her mother had tested positive to COVID-19 and then apologised profusely and said she was negative.

However, they were told Ms Elias would need to stay in her room for four to six weeks and be swabbed every week to test for COVID-19 because the virus was so prevalent at the home.

"Communication to family and next steps are paramount," Ms Grouios said.

There have now been 54 cases linked to Estia Health in Ardeer, 37 to Glendale Aged Care facility in Werribee, 30 to Arcare Aged Care in Craigieburn, 26 to Estia Health in Heidelberg, 20 to Bapcare Wyndham Lodge in Werribee, 18 to Embracia Aged Care Moonee Valley in Avondale Heights, and a new outbreak at Kirkbrae Presbyterian Homes in Kilsyth.

Premier Daniel Andrews said "a bunch" of aged care workers were among those going to work when sick or while waiting for test results.

"Let's not judge them. Let's try and work out what is driving it. I think the financial hardship and insecurity of work is a really big factor," he said.

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### **Jewel Topsfield**



Jewel Topsfield is a senior reporter at The Age. She has worked in Melbourne, Canberra and Jakarta as Indonesia correspondent. She has won multiple awards including a Walkley and the Lowy Institute Media Award.

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### **Nick Bonyhady**



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## Running totals: infection source of COVID-19 cases in Victoria over time

Returned traveller in hotel quarantine      Local transmission (known source)      Local transmission (unknown source)  
Under investigation

*Data: Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, compiled from Department of Health and Human Services*

Mr Andrews said a \$1500 hardship payment and additional announcements he would make soon would help address that.

Aged care workers would also get paid pandemic leave to encourage them to stay home if they were sick, under a Fair Work Commission plan.

The commission, which is an independent tribunal responsible for Australia's industrial rules, said on Wednesday it was looking to give staff in aged care homes paid pandemic leave because of the rapidly rising number of cases in Victoria, where at least 40 homes have recorded active infections.

The commission wants to hear more advice before making a final decision, including about whether the state government's \$1500 payment to aged care workers who have to self-isolate is enough to help them.

Leading Age Services, an industry group, said if the Fair Work Commission opted to give workers paid pandemic leave, governments should help bear the cost.

"It is crucial that no staff or providers are disadvantaged during these challenging times," a spokesman said. The industry was working with governments to ensure it had adequate staffing if paid pandemic leave was introduced, he said.

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