

Parliament's independent watchdog to inspect secure aged care facilities

15 April 2020

Chief Ombudsman Peter Boshier is to begin a series of targeted inspections this week to provide an independent assessment of how secure aged care facilities are responding to COVID-19.

“I have to act now because several aged care facilities now have clusters of the disease and sadly a number of people have died.”

“Up until the COVID-19 pandemic, my team has been doing orientation visits to aged care facilities with the intention of starting inspections from mid next year. I have reset my plans due to the present crisis and have now been confirmed as an essential service to undertake these inspections.

Mr Boshier says his assessments will focus on key issues concerning the care of a particular group of at risk aged care residents — those who are detained in the facilities.

“My role is to provide independent oversight of the treatment of some of the most vulnerable people in the aged care sector — people who are kept in locked facilities because of dementia or some other cause.”

“I believe the public needs reassurance about two things — that the facilities are doing all they can to prevent the virus from spreading to those most at risk, and that steps are being taken to make sure the basic human rights of residents are protected.”

“I have also been concerned at local media reports about the dislocation of families during the lockdown, where residents have little or no access to their loved ones.”

He welcomes the decision by the Director General of Health to order a review of the facility outbreaks and to write to District Health Boards asking them to systematically assess the readiness of aged residential care providers in their area.

Mr Boshier says he understands this is a challenging time for both staff and residents.

“My team will visit a variety of secure aged care facilities across the country, the team will be small, and they will be tightly focussed. My team will be assessing facilities against a set of criteria specifically developed for this pandemic, and aligned with United Nations’ advice.

“The team will inspect the facility and talk to managers, residents and staff. They may also make contact with family and whānau by phone.”

Mr Boshier says he is taking steps to keep everyone safe during the visits.

“My staff will wear protective equipment and are working with the Ministry of Health’s safety guidelines.”

Mr Boshier says New Zealand has signed up to an international treaty known as the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture (OPCAT) to protect the rights and conditions of those held in detention. The Chief Ombudsman is designated by the Minister of Justice to carry out independent inspections under OPCAT.

“The advice I have received internationally is that across the world, the rights of people kept under detention are more at risk during this terrible crisis rather than less. As the New Zealand Parliament’s watchdog for people detained in secure aged care facilities, I must act now.”

He is also monitoring the treatment and conditions of people held in other places of detention, including prisons and other health and disability facilities during this time.

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Contact Mark Torley, Manager Communications, on 027 2755733.

Mark.Torley@ombudsman.parliament.nz

More information about the Chief Ombudsman’s monitoring role at:

www.ombudsman.parliament.nz/what-we-can-help/monitoring-places-detention.