

# RESEARCH SUMMARY

## Inside Ontario's Long-term Care: Where do Privately Paid Companions Fit?



### What is this research about?

In long-term care, staff provide care to a large number of residents who are typically older adults who have heavy levels of medical and social needs. In this context, more families hire private paid companions ("companions") to provide one-on-one care. As companions are neither nursing home staff, nor family, nor volunteers, they occupy a "grey" area that families, long-term care facilities, and researchers need to better understand because companions' work with residents can place residents, staff and themselves at risk.

### What did the researchers do?

Researchers in Toronto used three methods to collect data. First, they observed in 7 large nursing homes of 100 beds or more for one-week and recorded their observations, mapped dining spaces, and interviewed 203 companions, staff, family, students, and volunteers about their tasks. Second, they sent an online survey to all the nursing homes in Ontario and Alberta. Third, they looked at legal documents in order to understand how companions are addressed in nursing home regulations.

### What you need to know:

Companions often perform the same role as Care Aides, but get to do more social care. The role played by companions is virtually invisible, and there are few rules governing what they do, even though they fill a growing care gap left by too few staff in nursing homes.

When families feel pressure to hire a companion this shifts a care burden from the public sector into the private realm of care onto families and individuals. Companions are not often covered by statutory regulations as families pay under the table. There are few rules covering companions. There are no proper police checks or checks on credentials. Staff often feel that companions are there to "monitor" and "report" on them. Policy-makers and managers of LTC facilities need to develop protocols that address everyone who "works" in nursing homes, including companions.

### What did the researchers find?

Companions were found to occupy a complicated position in nursing homes on several counts. These individuals work in facilities, but they are not directly regulated by nursing home legislation. They are care workers who work in nursing homes, but they are not nursing home staff employed by facilities. They visit and are often employed by families, but they are not family members or volunteers.

1. **Not regulated:** Ontario's Nursing homes are regulated by the *Long-term Care Homes Act* (2007), which sets standards for staff directly employed by facilities, volunteers, and family. Companions are not directly regulated. For this reason, they do not need to receive the same training and orientation that staff and volunteers do in key areas such as resident rights, abuse, fire safety, and infection control.
2. **Care workers, but not care staff:** More than a third of facilities do not have written rules about what companions can and cannot do. When rules do exist, they are often unclear or are not well understood by staff, families, or companions. Some staff found that companions improved the quality and length of residents' lives, while others reported being jealous that companions were able to spend more quality time with residents. Yet, unlike nursing home staff, companions are not part of unions, have few or no extended health benefits, and are not protected from losing their jobs at short notice.
3. **Visiting for families, but not family:** More and more families are paying out of pocket for companions for a variety of reasons. Companions are costly, and thus they are only an option for families that are able to afford them. This can leave others feeling guilty or worried if they are not able to afford this cost. Some private paid companions become like family members to residents in their care, sometimes "volunteering" their time between paid shifts.

## How can you use this research?

There is very little research on private paid companions in nursing homes. The findings described here help to underline the presence of these workers in nursing homes, reveal issues that they face, and highlight the need for further research on this topic. This research suggests policy-makers and managers of long-term care facilities need to develop protocols that address everyone who "works" in nursing homes, including private companions hired by families.

### About the researchers

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