

Selection of Letters from Frontline Workers at Grace Villa
(Transcribed and anonymized by SEIU staff)

Letter 1

[Handwritten]

When the outbreak started in March, I approached management about wearing masks, was told it would do nothing but worry residents. No masks were given until the government made mandatory. We were directed to take one surgical mask at start of shift and use it for the whole eight-hour shift. There were no extra available on the floor to replace any soiled mask.

When residents started getting sick in November before the outbreak was declared we didn't have any gowns, N95, shields, or proper isolation carts in rooms. We were directed NOT to wear N95 by all management, administrator, DOC, ADOC, and head of Environmental Services.

When the outbreak started on November 25, I worked on November 26, there was still no isolation carts in the rooms, no extra garbage can in any isolation rooms and we still were asking for gowns. We were given one shield and told to wear one shield whole shift, if it got soiled, we were directed to wipe it with Virox and continue to use it.

Management gave us a speech about mountains of PPE available, but it wasn't on floors. There was staff standing in the hall yelling for more gowns, they'd have to let RPN know, then RPN would have to notify management and we'd wait to have it delivered to floor. Residents would be falling on floor or choking, and we would have to wait 30 minutes to enter the room while we waited for gowns to be delivered.

Letter 2

[Emailed]

I'm simply going to describe a few hours of just one of the nightmare shifts that I worked. I never dreamed that what happened, that what went on in Grace Villa could ever happen in Canada. This is not a third world country, a war torn country, but inside you'd have thought it was. The chaos, confusion and outright neglect that took place all while we begged and cried for help, tried to advocate for our residents was surreal to watch and to be a part of. It was heart breaking, traumatizing and it was criminal.

We had 3 PSWs, one GV RPN and one nurse from HHS. I was grateful for the help we had just started receiving from HHS, but at times it was difficult as it was apparent it was up to us to train them and provide guidance to them on the floor to keep them and our residents safe. This was difficult as we had received no guidance or support ourselves. We had no leadership, no training or instruction on how to manage a full blown Covid outbreak on a locked unit with over 60 Alzheimer's residents and we certainly didn't have the manpower to give them much of our time.

We were no longer getting reports at the start of our shifts, we were just told that there were positive Covid cases on both wings of the unit and to assume that everyone was positive. The three of us got right to doing a quick round and quickly realized that we had walked into a war zone. The previous shift had been just as short staffed. We received 9 residents laying in soiled and or soaked briefs, wearing little or no clothing or bedding on bare mattresses that were saturated with urine. 2 of them saturated with vomit and urine and it was obvious that many of them were suffering with fevers.

We had not been receiving linens regularly as staffing in laundry was a problem and when laundry was done the carts of clothes and linens were just pushed off of the elevators onto the unit for the frontline staff who were already drowning, to deal with. It was only a few days previous that we had been using pillow cases and sheets to do care, including peri care, because that was all that we had. We eventually ran out of sheets so we cut up a queen sized blanket. When I told a superior we had no linens at all, his reply as he walked away was “yes you do”.

We did not have a single face cloth, peri cloth or towel of any sort on the unit. Every single room was trashed. Overflowing cardboard boxes full of dirty PPE, soiled briefs and food trays, many of them untouched. Some residents still had food trays sitting in front of them from the previous meal. Trays were often balanced on beds as we did not have nearly enough tables. There was food all over the beds all over the floors and all over our residents. Medications were found on the floors of many rooms.

At least 25% of the soap dispensers, sanitizer dispensers and paper towel holders were empty. Most rooms were missing at least one of the three, if not more.

While providing care to the best of our ability, we were also trying to keep our wandering residents from leaving their wing (which is a hallway) as we had heard through the grapevine that the common area where our residents usually gather and lounge when they're not in their rooms was to remain a “clean” area. This task alone required several staff members that didn't exist, so the doors had to be barricaded. Being caged in a hallway obviously triggered many behaviours in our residents and exacerbated their confusion. Trying to redirect them, calm them or soothe them using the tools that are usually very effective mostly just seemed to make things worse, which is not surprising as I can only imagine what they saw when we approached them in our full PPE. They're unable not only to see us but many of them had trouble hearing us due to masks and shields and the general chaos around them, so we had to raise our voices to a yelling level.

I saw residents that have never showed an ounce of aggression become aggressive and residents that do have a history of aggressive behaviours become violent.

Another thing that is going on our wing (where there was 2 of us, the other wing only had one psw) during this madness was we had residents sorting through the boxes of garbage I mentioned earlier. I saw more than one person wearing dirty gowns, carrying dirty gloves and eating food that we had not given them. Throughout the course of our shift we found people covered up in bed with dirty PPE. We had at least one resident who in all of their confusion and in all of the chaos around them, sensed that some of their peers and their friends needed care and someone was doing their best to provide them that. This was the first of many times that I broke down and cried on this particular day. I cried tears of frustration, outrage, guilt, shame, shock and utter heart break over the next 14 hours. All while working as hard as I possibly could and then some only to fail miserably at providing the most basic necessities of life at times to my charges.

And it's not even dinner time yet. To order the meals, deliver them to every resident donning and doffing full PPE with each meal, returning to feed, assist or supervise each and every resident followed by collecting all the food trays (again donning and doffing ppe 40 times or more) and trying to prevent our wanderers from eating food that is dangerous for them (diabetics, puréed or minced diets etc) would take hours under normal circumstances. Our residents didn't get proper nutrition or hydration. We were forced to neglect our residents. We begged for help and were ignored, criticized and received

more than a few eye rolls from management when we used words like war zone to describe what was happening.

I'm not making excuses for our pleas being ignored when I say this, but I know what I saw with my own eyes seemed surreal at times, I couldn't believe what was happening and even more so that it just kept going on and on for days on end. I think that when we tried telling anyone who would listen what was going on whether it was our management, corporate, the media or our govt...it was so unfathomable, that it was impossible for them to comprehend. I was in it day after day and it's still unfathomable to me.

I believe that our management, corporate, the media, our govt, etc. to this day still don't have a true picture of how badly they failed everyone.

There was no plan. If there was one it wasn't shared with us. I realize it may have just slipped their minds as having their offices renovated during the early days of this outbreak seemed to take up a lot of their time. Our ADOC got Covid, which wasn't shocking to us after witnessing her attempt at donning PPE properly when it was handed to her. She had no idea of best practice. Our DOC went off to isolate for the next 6 weeks, as she had been exposed. We had all been exposed. And many of us who actually had Covid weren't even off that long. They jumped ship.

Yes, many of our beloved residents died of Covid. Less would have died had we been able to provide better care. Just keeping them hydrated most days was next to impossible. Basic hydration could have prevented some of those deaths. But nobody would listen.

Letter 3

[Handwritten]

January 7, 2021

I was told repeatedly that N95 was not allowed for PSWs because we aren't doing aerosol procedures, but resident could cough on us and we will be fine? I personally was about to walk off my evening shift and was stopped by EDOC and DOC, ADDC and told that N95 masks were for "NURSES ONLY" and is "false protection" for us PSWs. We were NOT given proper PPE from the beginning, we had to go around looking for gowns to enter rooms. Once I even went into a room without a gown because there weren't any available.

On top of all of the PPE issues, residents were being moved up here to the "COVID UNIT" from other floors, and staff were working other floors as well. The whole outbreak could have been prevented if proper PPE and protocols were followed. Why are we not being paid time and a half if the outbreak is not over, and it also didn't start at the beginning of the outbreak, it started in the middle for a mere two-week extra staff? No one wanted to come up and help, everyone was scared of us when coming in and leaving our shifts.

Letter 4

[Handwritten]

After the first wave, we were cut back, shift per line. This should have never happened knowing there could be another wave. Always working short, somethings two to a wing. The week before we were

telling registered staff something was not right with some of the residents because of COVID precautions should have been taken.

When they declared the outbreak, we were not given proper PPE. We asked and were told we don't need N95 because our type of work does not need N95.

We asked for cleaning staff to be sent up, but no one came. Nothing was cleaned for the day. The third floor was left on our own as always.

Letter 5

[Handwritten]

On November 25, at 530 am. They told us that we had a resident test positive for COVID-19. As the staff were coming to work, they greeted everyone to tell them. The third-floor staff were scared to go up. They got mad at the staff and told them to find a union rep. I was told to tell the staff someone would be up there to care for the COVID-19 patient and trusted that they would not put any staff in danger. The management, the person who spoke to us never went up to the third floor. That was the beginning of the lies and leaving the third floor to die.

Letter 6

[Handwritten]

On December 7, I was working on the third floor wearing my N96 mask. I was approached by an infection control person from the hospital (unknown name) who informed me that I did not need to wear this (only persons in ICU) needed them. I then removed it and replaced it with a medical mask.

The next day, I found out I was positive for COVID (indirect relationship to above).

I returned from being sick to learn that we did not have my mask size and I would need to be rested for another size. It took three days to be tested because there no one in the building capable of performing the tests. The people who I was told we had had no training and were not able to do it.

Letter 7

[Handwritten]

Were alive and desperately needing care and the third floor is still left with little – while other floors have 9,10,11, agency PSWs, the third floor has 6 to 7 staff only. The third has the most residents but again no help. We are overlooked and have the least number of staff.

Our staff's mental health needs to be addressed. Some of us handle things better than others but all of us are broken. We need someone to take responsibility for failing to protect our staff and residents. For forcing us to 'nurse' in away hat made us decide who got care today and who had to wait. The images of residents, some hanging out of beds moaning, vomiting, crying. It is all too much to bear. I still can't sleep at night. I am not the same person who went to the third floor on November 27. None of us will ever be the same again and how do we return and work for a company that did not give a crap about us? We need our story to be told. Maybe then we can begin to heal.

Also, we now are being told that we will be docked pay for punching in late but the link up to get into work is long and takes forever for each staff to go through screening.

Letter 8

[Handwritten]

Thursday, November 26, 2020, I approached the doc asking her for N95 masks. She told me in front of others that I need a doctor's note and that I might be told that this is not an environment for me because I voice my concerns that's I have asthma and felt that we needed proper protection.

She said that they have N95 in storage but told that it's not necessary at this time and that the decision to give N95 masks is out of her hands. I felt threatened because she told me that I might be told that this was not an environment for me. I didn't feel that she cared from her expression. She didn't take the proper approach in regard to safety first.