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NOTL care home deaths **rise to five** as positive cases surge

Richard Harley
The Lake Report

Five people have died after a COVID outbreak at a Niagara-on-the-Lake nursing home. The large COVID

outbreak at Niagara Long Term Care surged over the past two weeks.

It grew to 90 active cases as of Wednesday, including 68 residents and 22 staff, executive director Chris Poos told The Lake Report.

In addition, four residents and five staff have recovered, Poos said. A week ago there had been 25 cases and one death at the Wellington Street facility.

Niagara public health statistics on Wednesday

showed 95 active cases in NOTL and 238 cases since the pandemic began. However, there also are nine confirmed cases at Pleasant Manor in Virgil and The Lake Report was unable to clarify the discrepancy in

the active case numbers.

Last week at this time, NOTL had 62 active cases and 181 total.

Vaccinations continue to be rolled out to residents of Niagara-on-the-Lake's three long-term care homes, de-

spite troubles with the supply chain and outbreaks at the two facilities.

At Upper Canada Lodge, where there have been no positive tests, residents were

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Canadians **escape** at NOTL airport



Cassandra Vinckers and her dog Fancy prepare to board a helicopter to Buffalo from the Niagara District Airport. As part of the service, her vehicle is waiting in Buffalo so she can drive down to Florida. RICHARD HARLEY

Julia Sacco
The Lake Report

Canadian snowbirds wanting to escape to the southern United States have been flocking to Niagara-on-the-Lake to hop on a helicopter for a quick flight

to Buffalo — then hopping in their car and heading to warmer climates.

It's a seamless but not inexpensive option — and it doesn't violate any government COVID rules, says Great Lakes Helicopter general manager Dwayne

Henderson.

Flights cost \$1,200 plus tax for up to three passengers and they'll also transport your vehicle over the border (by car carrier) to meet you. That's another \$700 — or \$1,600 for larger vehicles. From arrival

in NOTL to getting in your car in Buffalo is about four hours, he said.

The same flying rules apply to the chopper flights as scheduled airlines flying from Pearson airport

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Maria Dos Santos, the first long-term care resident in NOTL to receive a COVID-19 vaccine. SUPPLIED

Upper Canada Lodge resident **first** in NOTL's care homes to get vaccine

Richard Harley
The Lake Report

Maria Dos Santos was the first long-term care resident in Niagara-on-the-Lake to receive a COVID-19 vaccine.

She received her first dose of the two-part Pfizer vaccine last Thursday, with Dr. Tim Bastedo of the Niagara North health team at her side.

Marg Lambert, Upper Canada Lodge administrator, said as of last Thursday almost all residents had been vaccinated. The home is waiting to hear from Niagara public health to confirm the official date for the second dose of the vaccine.

So far, the facility, operated by the Region of

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Friends of Ryerson Park ask for **big changes**

Richard Harley
The Lake Report

The Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake will look at solutions to problems with excess traffic and parking in Chautauqua.

In the meantime, councillors have asked staff to report back with a tem-

porary solution by April, to help curb traffic during the 2021 season.

The decision was in response to concerns from a resident group called Friends of Ryerson Park. The group was formed in 2020 to tackle the traffic issues it says have been increasing for years and

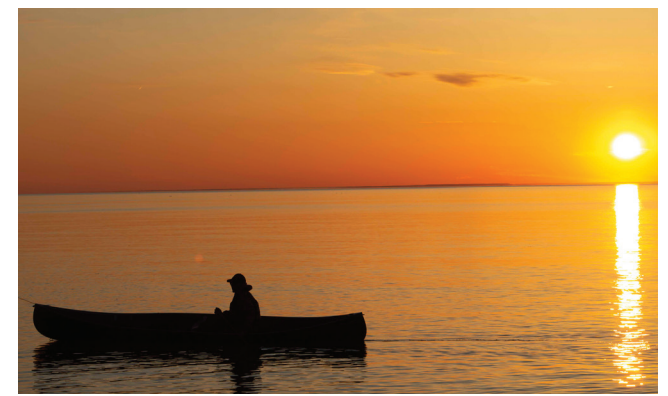
to preserve the "integrity of the unique Chautauqua neighbourhood."

The group says it has support from 300 Chautauqua residents from 146 households — out of 195 total households in the area, along Lake Ontario in the western end of Old Town.

Chautauqua resident John Scott presented the group's report of concerns to councillors Monday.

Among the long list of issues were that Chautauqua's short, narrow streets are being blocked by an influx in parked cars,

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Stunning sunsets are part of the attraction to Ryerson Park. FILE PHOTO/RICHARD HARLEY



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Snowbirds use **helicopter** to escape to the sun

Flights cost a cool \$1,200, plus \$700 to bring your vehicle

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to Florida. It's been so busy that some days Great Lakes, based in Cambridge, Ont., has four helicopters ferrying people over the border from Niagara District Airport.

"We've probably done 250 runs and we will probably have between now and the end of February close to 150 so close to 400 (flights have dispatched)," Henderson said in an interview.

"We've had people travel from Nova Scotia, lots from Quebec, Montreal, lots of 613 and 705 area codes," he said.

Henderson said the people using the service are "typically retired snowbirds" in "reasonable good health."

The flights from Niagara District Airport abide by all COVID safety protocols, he said.

The limited contact and being able to pick up your car on the other side are attractive options for customers, he said.

"You don't have any security lineups and you have no customs lineups, the only interaction you have with anybody is the pilot and, of course, that's all masked and the aircraft is cleaned," he said.

In Buffalo, customs officials come out to the helicopter and clear passengers without having to wait in line.

"You're in a private waiting area. We have the entire Niagara District terminal when we're there so you have no other passengers and then when you go over to Tac Air in Buffalo there's virtually no one else there," said Henderson.

Flights usually operate four times daily, Thursday through Monday, beginning at 7:15 a.m.

"You show up at 6:45 in the morning. We take the keys to your vehicle, we do your COVID screening, you go in, sit down, we offer coffee and donuts, you sit there and wait for your helicopter," said Henderson.

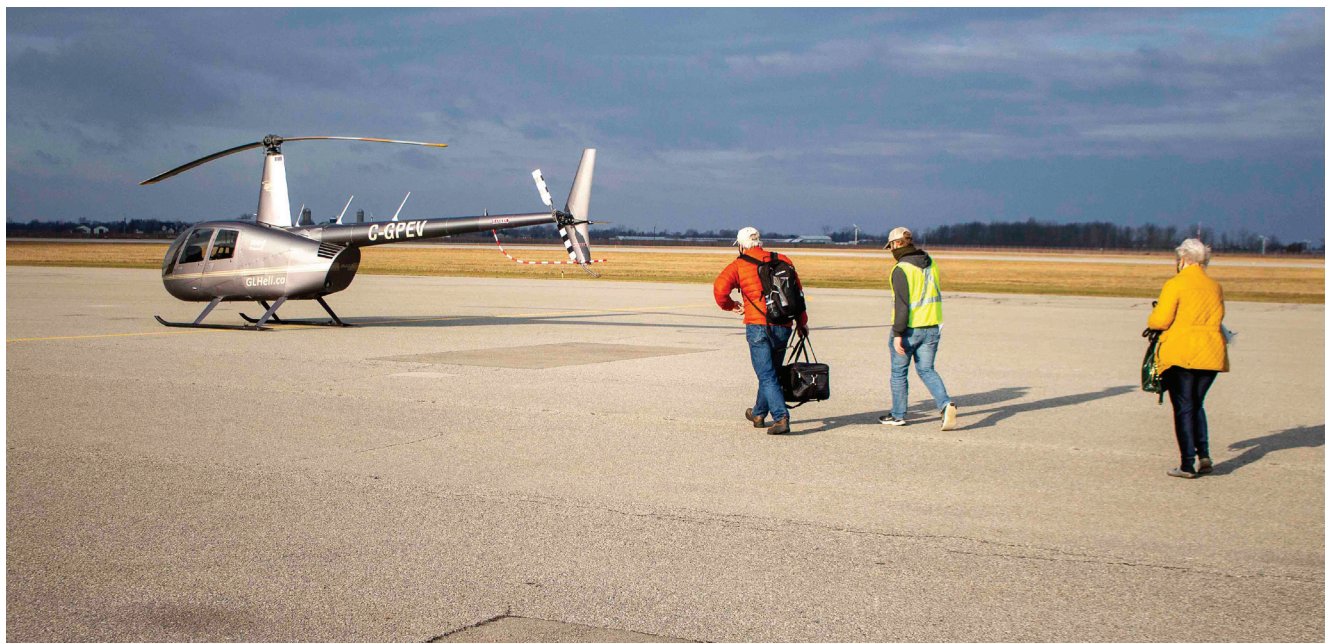
"You take off and 20 minutes later you're landing in Buffalo."

Despite criticisms from some quarters, Henderson insists that Great Lakes Helicopters is no different than flying out of any other major airport on a plane during the pandemic.

"There is no loophole, there is not a rule that we're taking an interpretation of. The rule is that you can fly into the U.S. We're flying into the U.S.," said Henderson.



Top: Cassandra Vinckers leaves for Buffalo from the Niagara District Airport. Bottom: Doug and Joan Young head to their helicopter to Buffalo. From there they will drive down to their Florida home. RICHARD HARLEY PHOTOS



Fliers feel they can isolate **just as well** in Florida homes

Richard Harley
The Lake Report

Doug and Joan Young from Barrie woke up extra early Sunday to head to Niagara-on-the-Lake to catch a cross-border helicopter flight and begin their trek to Florida.

They needn't have worried — there was barely any traffic thanks to the lockdown.

The two own a home in Port Charlotte, Fla., and feel even though Florida is a COVID hotbed, they're

safe in their gated community.

"We'll just stay in our own house, like we're doing here, and at least we can get out and walk and golf," Doug Young said.

"And we figure this situation is probably the best in terms of safety, because all we have to worry about is the helicopter pilot."

The Youngs were on one of two 9:15 a.m. flights, along with their dog Bentley, a miniature poodle.

They said they heard about Great Lakes Helicopter's service to Buffalo from a friend who used it in December. He brought his cat down.

Another couple they know is leaving Jan. 21 and bringing two cats.

"It's the safest way for us to travel," said Joan. "Better than going on a plane and then we don't have our car."

Cassandra Vinckers and her dog Fancy (a lurcher), were on the other 9:15 a.m. flight.

She was headed to Ocala, Fla., where other

snowbirds were waiting for her.

"This is an adventure. It sure beats staying at home," she said. "And it was already organized before this whole stay-at-home thing came into effect."

She emphasized the flights are not violating any laws or pandemic rules. "We're not in direct contravention of anything just yet," she said.

"I feel I can self-isolate in the south as well as up here, maybe better, as there

are more opportunities to get outside and get some exercise with my dog."

Part of the draw of the helicopter flight is being able to bring her large dog.

Doug Young said he and his wife could have taken a plane, but he thinks it's a lot more dangerous.

They said it will be their first time flying since the beginning of the pandemic — and a first-ever helicopter trip for Joan.

They said once they got into their vehicle they planned to drive straight to

Florida, not staying at any hotels.

The only place they'll need to stop is for takeout food along the way.

"We'll probably eat Wendy's or McDonald's all the way so we can just go through the drive-thru," Joan said.

"We're gonna be as safe as we can," Doug added.

"When we're in our own home down there it's like being in our own home here, except we've got nice weather, can sit out, and we're on a golf course."



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