

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

December 22, 2021

Statement from B.C. Seniors Advocate Isobel Mackenzie

British Columbia is currently experiencing a fifth wave of the COVID-19 pandemic fueled by the highly transmissible Omicron variant. In response, public health officials have undertaken several new measures to blunt the potential of this wave to overtake our health care system. These public health restrictions limit the opportunities for transmission and large outbreaks, accelerate the vaccine booster schedule, and expand the provincial testing strategy to include further use of rapid antigen tests to compliment the use of PCR testing. Together, these measures along with the use of masks and the BC Vaccine Card, will hopefully reduce the severity of the fifth wave. I ask every British Columbian to continue to follow the public health guidelines to protect our vulnerable seniors.

While COVID-19 can cause severe illness and death at any age, those aged seventy and older in B.C. have been disproportionately impacted. Since the pandemic began, those aged seventy and older who contracted COVID-19 were 22 times more likely to die than people who were younger, and those aged eighty and older were 44 times more likely to die.

Frail seniors living in long-term care suffered significantly in the first two waves of the pandemic from the virus and visit restrictions. In response, measures to protect our seniors in long term care have been put in place, including mandatory vaccination for staff and visitors, and booster shots for residents and staff. The province has also expanded its rapid testing program for long-term care staff and visitors, providing an additional layer of protection for seniors and their loved ones.

In order to protect the seniors in our communities, as the majority of seniors aged seventy and older still live in their own home, we must limit our exposure to others and keep our circles small during this current wave. In order to allow seniors in the community to safely have contact with loved ones, rapid antigen tests should be available for at-home use to protect this vulnerable population.

Today, I am asking the provincial government to make rapid antigen tests (RAT) available in the community, so that individuals may test themselves prior to visiting their loved ones who are elderly and at highest risk of severe illness. Additionally, I am also asking any members of the public who have secured their own supply of RATs to use them wisely and prioritize usage of the tests for visits with elderly or clinically extremely vulnerable loved ones.

I am also asking that the government, in conjunction with its accelerated booster shot schedule, reduce the current requirement of a minimum of six months between an individual's second dose and their third dose/booster. This change reflects the current reality of British Columbia as we face a pandemic with the highly transmissible Omicron variant.

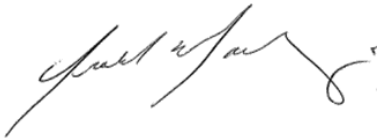
In the meantime, I strongly encourage everyone to book their third dose/booster shot as soon as possible. Now more than ever, this third shot is critical in our management of the pandemic. And for

those who have not yet been vaccinated, I implore you to do so immediately. Vaccines not only protect you, but also those around you and our communities at large.

The past two years have been difficult for everyone, but British Columbians have shown they will do the right thing to protect themselves, their loved ones, and their community. Every day I hear stories of people helping seniors, such as getting groceries or medications and checking in by having a friendly chat. To all those who have lent a hand over this pandemic, I say a profound thank you.

As we near the end of another challenging year, I join so many others in offering my heartfelt thanks to our health care workers. Every front-line worker has my sincere gratitude.

While this is not the holiday season we were all hoping for, if we follow public health guidelines, we can find a way to safely spend time with some of our loved ones. My best wishes for the holiday season to everyone.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Isobel Mackenzie', with a stylized flourish at the end.

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