

# dialogue

January 31, 2008

A bi-weekly update on issues  
affecting health care in Ontario

## Government stops home care bidding process after 1500 attend Hamilton rally

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The government blinked after a month-long campaign in Hamilton to end the bidding system to determine which agency or company will provide home care services.

Health Minister George Smitherman officially froze the competitive bidding process in Ontario's home care sector on January 28. No request for proposals (RFPs) for nursing, personal support, therapy and homemaking services will be issued until the government has an opportunity to review the current Community Care Access Centre procurement process. RFPs for medical supplies and equipment will continue.

The freeze comes less than a week after Smitherman stopped the awarding of a Hamilton nursing contract that would have ended generations of service to the community by the Victorian Order of Nurses and St. Joseph's Home Care.

More than 220 nurses plus clerical staff breathed a sigh of relief upon hearing the news. Their agency contracts – and likely their employment – would have expired at the end of March. The two agencies, already facing staffing shortages, provide about 80 per cent of existing nursing care in Hamilton. Had the contracts not been renewed, thousands of patients would have likely struggled to find care providers.

"The government has been forced to change its mind because of the massive outcry from patients and health providers," said OPSEU President

Warren (Smokey) Thomas. "This is encouraging news. We spoke and they listened."

### 1,500 attend rally

The Hamilton campaign culminated with a January 16<sup>th</sup> rally at a suburban banquet hall attended by 1,500 supporters of the VON and St. Joseph's Home Care. Filling the hall to capacity, many were left outside, unable to get through the doors.

Hosted by comedian Mary Walsh and Hamilton media figure Jason Farr, the event mixed music, video clips and speeches by patients, families, community leaders, politicians and leaders from the four affected unions.

NDP leader Jack Layton spoke of his own frustrations accessing adequate home care for his mother-in-law last year – eventually returning her to the hospital's emergency ward.

Singer Tom Juravich performed a new song written for the occasion – "What Will You Do When I'm Gone?" – which also served as the title of two short video clips of agency workers speaking about the negative impact of competitive bidding. Many said that if their agency's contract had not been renewed, they would likely leave community care.

Lucy Morton, Interim President of OPSEU Local 269 (VON Hamilton), became the face of the campaign in Hamilton, frequently appearing on radio, television and in print. She also spoke to numerous groups, engaging

the community around the issue. The government promises it will provide further details on next steps soon. Meanwhile, the Ontario Federation of Labour Health Care Committee is meeting in February to look at alternatives to competitive bidding. Competitive bidding has brought in many poor performing agencies into the mix. The OFL will need to look at ways of protecting front-line health care staff while weeding out the "bad apple" agencies and companies from the system.

In a January 28 memo to CCACs, Assistant Deputy Minister Hugh McLeod says the government is reviewing procurement procedures to "ensure they support the principles of putting the client first" and to enable "continuity of care and stability for health care workers."

### Health Canada Report

Meanwhile, the Health Council of Canada has issued a January 30 report calling for greater access to home care across the country. In 2005, two to five per cent of Canadians used home care services while three to four per cent of seniors (65+) said they needed home care services they did not receive. In 2006, one in four Canadians said they cared for a family member or close friend with a serious health problem in the last 12 months, with 22 per cent of those caregivers missing one or more months of work and 41 per cent using personal savings.

# Andrea Horwath introduces bill to amend Occupational Health and Safety Act

Hamilton MPP Andrea Horwath has introduced a Bill that requires employers to protect workers from harassment and violence in the workplace.

Bill 29 would give workers the right to refuse to work in certain circumstances when faced with harassment or violence. It requires an investigation of allegations of workplace related harassment and violence, and requires employers to take steps to prevent further occurrences.

Bill 29 defines violence as the threatened, attempted or actual exercise of any physical force by a person that endangers the physical health or safety of a worker, and includes any threatening statement or behaviour that gives a worker reasonable cause to believe that he or she is at risk of physical injury.

Violence in the workplace received national attention late last year upon the inquest into the murder of Windsor

nurse Lori Dupont. In October a CBC investigation also revealed that attacks by residents against staff at Ontario nursing homes more than doubled in the past four years.

The OPSEU Health Care Divisional Council is presently working on a campaign to press for greater protection against workplace violence. A draft of the campaign will be presented to an all-sectors meeting February 27.

## In Brief

### Muskoka Algonquin reaches agreement with Kelly Henry

**Kelly Henry**, the lab tech at Muskoka Algonquin Healthcare (MAHC) who faced discipline during the campaign to save local lab services, has reached an agreement with the hospital over her grievances. The parties negotiated a mutually agreeable settlement. The terms are confidential and cannot be disclosed. The support of OPSEU locals, Kelly's co-workers, and the community were instrumental in obtaining a satisfactory outcome. Unrelated to the settlement, Henry has since begun a new job at another hospital. There local is still concerned that the lab services in Muskoka are in jeopardy. The contract to continue community testing at the hospital was only renewed for one year – a decision that will soon be revisited. Meanwhile, the region continues to struggle to recruit and and retain health care professionals. At a conference on Health Human Resources in January, it was revealed the **North Simcoe Muskoka LHIN** had about 500 health care vacancies in a region serving 425,000 people. By population, it is one of the smallest LHIN jurisdictions in Ontario. Orillia's **Soldiers Memorial Hospital** and MAHC have recently combined their efforts to find an "Integrated Vice President, Human Resources." Both hospitals had faced vacancies for the position of Vice-President Human Resources. ....



Photos: Jaclyn Proudfoot

More than 1,500 people attended a January 16th rally in Hamilton against the competitive bidding process. Clockwise: Comedian Mary Walsh co-hosts the event; affected workers wore t-shirts asking "What Will You Do When I'm Gone?"; President Warren (Smokey) Thomas commits OPSEU's support. A week later the health minister stopped the bidding process in Hamilton and extending the freeze province-wide.

Last June the **Supreme Court of Canada** struck down provisions in British Columbia's Bill 29 – legislation that eliminated contracting-out protections from current and future collective agreement. The court ruled collective bargaining was protected under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. This month BC unions reached a tentative agreement after the court had given the government a year to deal with the repercussions of the ruling. The tentative agreement includes \$70 million in contract payments to health care workers affected by the Bill, \$5 million for

retraining, opportunities for laid off workers to apply for job vacancies in BC's health authorities, and union consultation on future contracting out. The same Supreme Court ruling helped pave the way for OPSEU to organize part-time CAAT employees who had been previously prohibited from joining a union under the College Collective Bargaining Act.... The **Ontario NDP** are looking for a health and social policy researcher. If you know someone who is interested, or would like more information, please contact **Valerie Fogarty** at [vfogarty@ndp.on.ca](mailto:vfogarty@ndp.on.ca)