

# dialogue

September 6, 2007

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

## Promise of staffing standards in long term care muddied by review

32

Ontario has stalled implementation of a staffing and care standard for long term care homes by appointing Shirlee Sharkey, President and CEO of St. Elizabeth Health Care, to conduct a review into the issue.

In a recent undated memo to long term care homes, deputy minister Ron Sapsford wrote "it is the government's intention... to develop regulations governing staffing and care standards in the homes."

However the review, coupled with a recent statement from the minister of health, leaves the government's commitment unclear.

Health Minister George Smitherman recently told activists in Sudbury that he was opposed to treating long term care residents as widgets, insisting that a minimum care level would take time away from residents more in need. The argument ignores the fact that such standards would be based on average case mix measure, an already accepted evaluation process for measuring the level of care required by residents.

There is also concern that staffing and care standards are absent from the Liberal platform — instead there is a commitment to hire 2,000 more nurses (RNs and RPNs) in the sector.

Sharkey's mandate does not reflect a clear intention to establish a staffing and care standard. Instead she has been asked to seek "stakeholder and expert views and provide advice on current research and practice concerning staffing standards."

The Harris government eliminated the former standard of 2.25 hours of direct care per resident per day (PRPD). The government claims the average level of care is presently 2.83 hours PRPD, a number disputed by advocates and workers in the long term care sector. A landmark 10-year study conducted for the U.S. Congress concluded 2.9 hours PRPD was the minimum required to prevent harm to residents, whereas 3.5 hours is the point where residents achieve positive health outcomes.

Many organizations called for 3.5 hours of care at this spring's hearings on the proposed Long-Term Care Homes Act, which received Royal Assent on June 4<sup>th</sup>.

Given the exhaustive testimony before the committee reviewing the proposed Bill, activists see Sharkey's appointment as an unnecessary delay in restoring care standards to Ontario's nursing homes.

While previously unsympathetic to organized labour, as a past president of the Registered Nurses Association of Ontario, Sharkey was an advocate of nurse-patient ratios, claiming research showed such ratios directly affect the rates of complications and re-admissions.

Sharkey is expected to report back to government by the end of the year.

By contrast to the Liberals, John Tory promises to upgrade long term care "spaces," but is silent on staffing standards. The New Democrats have promised minimum standards of care for seniors in long term care.

## Protecting members in the event of a LHIN integration

September 10<sup>th</sup> OPSEU and its labour partners return to the table to negotiate a central human resources adjustment plan to protect health care workers who may be affected by a LHIN integration decision.

The government and the Ontario Hospital Association have refused to provide a binding forum for establishing rules around such transitions, brought about by mergers, transfers and closure of health care facilities.

The two sides will be assisted at the meeting by mediator Gerry Lee. If the meeting fails to resolve the issue, OPSEU will seek to mobilize the membership during the election period to press for fair treatment of health care workers during such transitions.

The need for such an agreement was recently highlighted when about 20 workers at three Hamilton lab collection sites were given layoff notices in Hamilton. The collection facilities are scheduled to close at the end of October.

## 2nd lawsuit filed

The right-wing Canadian Constitution Foundation has launched a second court challenge to open the door to two-tier health care. Shona Holmes paid \$95,000 in the United States to treat a rare eye condition, circumventing wait lists in Ontario. Lawsuits filed on behalf of Holmes and Lindsay McCreath seeks to strike down bans on private health insurance for medically necessary procedures.