

Marin vows to protect seniors; Ombudsman says public has lost confidence in long-term care homes

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Ontario's watchdog says people have lost confidence in the way long-term care homes are run and vowed to determine if the government is doing enough to protect residents.

Ombudsman Andre Marin said yesterday he'll look at the standards long-term care homes have to meet and how the government monitors and enforces those standards. However, he can't probe the quality of care provided.

"Do I believe that I'm hamstrung at not going beyond those two issues? Of course," Marin said.

"But by the same token, there's a lot we can contribute with the two items we've decided to investigate."

There are 622 long-term care homes in Ontario with 75,000 residents. Marin said he will complete the investigation in six months.

The level of care Ontario's seniors are getting in such facilities has been an issue troubling the McGuinty government since it was first elected in 2003.

A report by backbencher Monique Smith the next year found massive gaps in quality, an over-reliance on restraints, seniors being fed cold breakfasts or left in front of blank walls where televisions had once been and homes that were smelly and cluttered.

"We early on learned about some of the horrible conditions in our long-term care centres," Premier Dalton McGuinty said at the time.

Just months later, his then-health minister George Smitherman promised "a revolution in long-term care."

But Marin said his office still fields hundreds of complaints on the issue and he said he believes the public has lost confidence in the system as it is now.

"The government itself said we must do better.

"Wherever you look, I sense a general dissatisfaction with how this sector is operating," he said.

Marin's investigators will also go over the more than 400 standards the government imposes on the homes and determine if they're all necessary -- something many operators have complained about. However, Marin indicated he may not put a lot of stock in their negative view.

"I find some of the long-term care operators, frankly, to be over the top, doth protest too much," Marin said.

"These people need to know there is almost \$3 billion given to the government to run these places.

"This is not money that does not have strings attached. It does have strings attached."

But Margaret Ringland, a spokesman for the Ontario Association for Non-Profit Homes and Services for Seniors, said many of the 463 standards that homes have to meet are simply not relevant to quality of care.

She said they divert attention and resources from the residents themselves. "It's just overwhelming to the homes," Ringland said.

"People are running around trying to dot their I's and cross their T's."

The Ontario Long Term Care Association, which represents about 70% of the facilities in Ontario, said it would welcome Marin's inspectors.

"These are open books and open doors," executive director Janet Lambert said.

She suggested the probe will find one underlying problem -- the government doesn't provide enough money for staff, resulting in Ontario having the second-lowest staffing levels in the country.

The **Canadian Union of Public Employees**, backed by the New Democrats, has been pushing for years for more funding, NDP MPP Peter Kormos said part of the problem has been that when money is added to the system, it doesn't go to provide hands-on care.

"I think long-term care in this province -- with hard-working staff -- ranges from good to Dickensian," Kormos said.

"Our constituency offices are overwhelmed by complaints from frustrated, angry, hurt families who see their parents and grandparents in abysmal conditions."

He welcomed the investigation but said Marin should be given far greater latitude.