

The Brockville Recorder and Times

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Provincial plans to lift a ban on competitive bidding for home-care services will hurt patients and providers alike, a news conference in Brockville heard Tuesday.

“Competitive bidding, quite frankly, doesn't work,” said Kelly O'Sullivan, president of the Toronto-area Local 4308 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE).

O'Sullivan, one of three speakers during the hour-long event at the Laurier Blvd. firehall, said the Liberal government twice suspended plans to allow competitive bidding because of confusion about the process and community action against the proposals in Hamilton and Niagara.

But home-care providers are concerned the ban will end when service contracts in some areas of the province expire March 31.

In Brockville, the contracts won't expire until the fall of 2011 but O'Sullivan said the provincial byelection in Leeds-Grenville provides a special opportunity to raise the issue.

Moreover, if the ban is lifted March 31 as expected, she believes local requests for proposals will be sent out well before 2011, creating stress and uncertainty among patients and providers for more than a year.

In response to a question from The Recorder and Times, O'Sullivan said competitive bidding from private firms has no place in health care.

Instead of putting profits into the pocket of shareholders, revenue should be plowed back into health care resources, she said.

She said a competitive bidding process leads to a “race to the bottom” in which private firms cut back their costs to keep their bids as low as possible.

The result, said O'Sullivan, is a reduction in the level of care provided to individual patients while workers experience cuts in wages and benefits.

“Quality care and good working conditions are intrinsically linked,” she said.

Ivan Langrish, spokesman from the office of Minister of Health and Long-Term Care Deb Matthews, said the ban will be removed as expected but noted the procurement procedure is designed to ensure quality care will be provided.

If a bidder can't satisfy the government's client-care standards, its price won't even be considered, Langrish said during a phone interview Tuesday afternoon.

Moreover, he said non-profit agencies are welcomed in the bidding process as well as for-profit companies.

Bids are considered by a committee in an open and transparent process that includes oversight by a “fairness monitor,” said Langrish.

At the firehall, home care provider Pam Huckle of Belleville said the process raises uncertainty among clients anxious about changes in their home-care routine, including a new and unfamiliar provider.

Huckle told the news conference providers are forced to work irregular shifts and often “volunteer” their time when the allotted schedule doesn't meet all the client's needs.

But that's not always possible because a provider may be scheduled to meet with another client and can't stay late, she said.

Moreover, management makes sure employee costs are kept to a minimum by keeping a lid on hours and cutting benefits such as mileage expenses.

She said the province has mandated a minimum wage of \$12.50 per hour for home-care workers but it's not a livable salary because of cutbacks in hours.

“Once you get up near 30 hours, they cut you off because that's when they have to pay benefits,” said Huckle.

“It works out to less than minimum wage ... but I do it because I care for my clients.”

Also speaking against the plan was Jim Riesberry, a local activist and member of the Ontario Health Coalition.

Riesberry said few students even consider a career in home care because they feel it's a poor choice in light of current conditions.

“Clients suffer and the workers suffer and the only people who gain are the for-profit companies,” said Riesberry.

Moreover, prior to the Liberal government replacing the Progressive Conservatives in 2003, Dalton McGuinty pledged to stop “creeping privatization,” said Riesberry.

“What have they done since? The opposite,” he said.

NDP candidate Steve Armstrong, the only byelection candidate to attend the meeting, said the government needs to return to the days before the Mike Harris Tory government which introduced competitive bidding to the process.

“Just go back to what worked for 100 years,” said Armstrong, referring to home-care funded by the province and provided by not-for-profit organizations such as the Victorian Order of Nurses.

Huckle and O'Sullivan cautioned, however, that the province has to provide adequate funding to enable that system to work properly.

The Brockville press conference was raised at Queen's Park Tuesday by NDP leader Andrea Horwath who asked the government to end the competitive bidding process.

Horwath argued the quality of home care has diminished since the inception of competitive bidding 10 years ago. At the same time, costs continue to increase, contradicting the government's belief it will lower the bill.

According to Hansard transcripts, Matthews said the competitive bidding process includes quality-care measurements and public reporting to ensure a high quality of care.

She said a bidding process will be transparent and ensure a consistent quality of care suited to their specific medical condition.