

Home-care workers blast bids' return

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A return to competitive bidding for home-care contracts will mean a lower quality of care for clients and poor conditions for worker, a union official said Tuesday.

Michael Hurley, president of the Ontario Council of Hospital Unions, is warning the public about the dangers of going back to a bidding system for the delivery of home care similar to what was in place in the province in the 1990s. At that time, Hurley said, competitive bidding resulted in reduced care for clients and difficult working conditions for employees.

Several years ago, the province placed a moratorium on the bidding process. Unions which represent home care workers in Ontario are concerned the province will lift that moratorium when existing service contracts expire March 31.

"A study found clients gradually received less and less care, especially in the kind of care that would support them to stay in the home," said Hurley, referring to a 2006 paper by McMaster University professor Dr. Jane Aronson. "The average salary of a home-care worker is \$12 an hour. There are no pensions for most workers and there are no benefits. There are no regular hours of work."

Pam Huckle has worked in home care in Eastern Ontario since the 1970s. She said when she first entered the field, things were much different.

"Back in the '70s, the program enabled people to be discharged from the hospital and to have homemaking and personal care assistance for four or eight hours a day so they could finish their recoveries at home," said Huckle. "Now, you get one-hour shifts or maybe a half-hour shift. You have to work weekends and evenings and it's a big disruption to family life."

Huckle said the competitive bidding process will result in more turnover among staff and that can be detrimental to a client's care.

"(It can) become a crisis for the client who is worried about losing their particular caregiver," said Huckle. "(It creates) added stresses for very vulnerable clients."

Huckle and Hurley are just two of a large group of workers and union officials touring the province ahead of the March 31 deadline. On Tuesday, they were accompanied by Hugh Armstrong of the CUPE-Ontario Health Coalition. "We are appealing to everyone in Ontario -- patients, families and concerned citizens -- to insist that this government redirect its whole approach to home care before it's too late," said Armstrong.