

## Warning sounded on home-care contract bidding

The St. Catharines Standard,  
Mar 23 2010,  
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A decision to accept competitive bids from home-care providers will have a disastrous effect on home-care service in Ontario, a group of public health-care advocates warned Monday in St. Catharines. The group, representing CUPE Ontario and the Ontario Health Coalition, urged the McGuinty government to extend a moratorium on competitive bids for home care set to expire alongside current service contracts on March 31. Not doing so, it says, would lead to further commercialization of home care, which has already proven disastrous for working conditions and quality of care.

In a 40-minute presentation to the media, the group listed the potential negative effects of competitive bidding, from the unpredictable nature of working hours -- leading to 57%-a-year turnover among support workers -- to a degradation in services provided to patients.

The group also worried a lifting of the ban would require Community Care Access Centres, provincial agencies responsible for recommending outpatients to care providers, to make referrals only to the cheapest care providers. Currently, the CCAC serving Niagara refers an average of 11,500 individuals per month to home-care providers.

Michael Hurley criticized the provincial Liberals for not living up their promise to end competitive bidding.

"We're here today to ask the Liberal government to honour the commitment it made to stop competitive bidding in the home-care sector," said Hurley, president of the Ontario Council of Hospital Unions.

Hurley said he is worried that competitive bidding will penalize unionized companies.

"It'll mean that anyone with higher labour costs will lose their contracts to a nonunionized entity," he said. "Once the moratorium is up, the contracts will go back to a tendering process, which will result in more upheaval for the health-care sector."

Sue Hotte, from the Ontario Health Coalition, said home care is becoming standardized to provide care at the lowest cost to patients regardless of quality.

"They're going to the lowest price at the expense of service," she said.

Hotte said private-sector health-care providers are concerned primarily with keeping costs low rather than with the quality of care.

"The only way you keep costs down is by cutting salary and hours of people working for you," she said. Pam Huckle, a retired home-care worker who worked for 20 years in the industry, said today's care workers are underpaid and overworked and are less willing to stay in the industry.

"It's not worth it to continue for some if you have a family," Huckle said.

Huckle said it's not uncommon during a one-hour visit to give a client she's never met a bath just minutes after she's met him or her.

"I state my name and the agency I work for," she said. "Then if I have to, I bathe them. They don't always like that."

The moratorium on competitive bids was instituted across the province following a public outcry on bidding two years ago in Hamilton.

A spokesman for the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care said the lifting of the moratorium was in line with recommendations in a December 2008 ministry report to set standards for home care.

For contracts awarded before the moratorium, said Andrew Morrison, bids from home-care providers were scored based primarily on quality of care.

Sue VanderBent from the Ontario Home Care Association, which represents service providers, said the government owed taxpayers to find bids that make sense economically.

"The government must perform its due-diligence when spending taxpayer dollars," said VanderBent, executive director of the agency. "We have to provide the best quality of care at the best price."