

Province expected to lift ban on bidding for home care services;

The Peterborough Examiner,
Mar 18 2010, Byline:
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Ontario's home health care system will be damaged substantially if the provincial government lifts its ban on competitive bidding for service contracts as planned, a union representative warned at a press conference Wednesday morning.

"The signals from the government are that they're going back to this failed system," said Doug Allan, a research representative for the Canadian Union of Public Employees, who called it "a very troubling development."

Roy Brady, a board member for the Ontario Health Coalition, and personal support worker Pam Huckle joined Allan at the press conference, held in the boardroom of the Peterborough Public Library. The provincial government is expected to lift its ban on competitive bidding for contracts with home care service providers effective March 31.

"They're trying to provide a much cheaper service," said Brady, to which Huckle added, "You get what you pay for."

The three representatives each stated that a return to competitive bidding -- originally introduced by Mike Harris's Progressive Conservative government in 1996--would damage the home care system, affecting the quality and effectiveness of service.

The system allows service providers to bid competitively for contracts to cut costs, rather than maintaining long-term contracts with the same agencies.

The press conference included a 10-minute video presentation. CUPE is touring the video across the province this month with other union representatives, home care employees and health care experts. "I think Peterborough mirrors the situation across Ontario," said Brady.

"Agencies can't keep good workers under these conditions," said Huckle, who has been a personal support worker for 20 years.

She described the changes she has seen in the system during that time.

"We could find a person living in absolute squalor," she said. "Nowadays we don't do any cooking or cleaning. When I started, we did."

Huckle said that a return to competitive bidding would have negative effects on both clients and support workers. Clients are often upset by changes to the system, fearing they will lose their service or that their routine will be interrupted.

"When you develop a relationship with a client, you become the eyes and ears of the system," she said. "Competitive bidding is detrimental to all concerned."

Brady said that 600,000 people in Ontario receive home health care --65% of whom are 65 or older. "The remaining 35% are very vulnerable people also," said Brady, who said that competitive bidding opens the system to companies not based within Canada.

"It's like having Coca-Cola look after your home care," he said.

Allan said that competitive bidding was suspended in 2004 following a controversy in Niagara which outraged some people when local service providers lost their contracts. The province extended existing contracts until 2007, but a similar incident in Hamilton again put a halt to the bidding process.

Peterborough MPP Jeff Leal said that he has heard "nothing but positive comments" about the agencies providing home care services in the area.

"Certainly, in the Peterborough area, we've been very satisfied with the people that are providing the contracts," he said Wednesday afternoon.