

Home care service up for bids

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By JIM KELLY

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Provincial Minister of Health Deb Matthews confirmed the McGuinty government plans to lift its ban on competitive bidding for home care but gave assurances that quality of patient care will be the top priority.

“Absolutely the bottom line is quality of care,” she said in an interview Tuesday with The Chronicle-Journal.

“If they (home care bidders) can’t meet quality standards, then we won’t even look at their bid,” Matthews said from Toronto.

She said current service contracts which expired March 31 will be extended but she didn’t provide a time frame as to how long this would be.

“It’s not just about getting the lowest price. Seventy-five per cent of the scoring will be based on quality and we want to have an open transparent process so those organizations applying to deliver services know what it is we’re looking for,” Matthews said.

Meanwhile, union officials, health care experts and home care workers met with reporters Tuesday and issued a stern warning about the repercussions of allowing competitive bidding in home care. They said Ontario’s already damaged home care system is at risk.

“Mike Harris did much to hurt our home care system and the Liberals not only allowed that to continue, but now appear set to make things even worse by bringing back a twice-suspended system of competitive bidding for home care contracts,” Fred Hahn, president of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Ontario, said at the news conference at the Lakehead Social Planning Council. The media conference was part of a provincewide media tour by CUPE Ontario in partnership with the Ontario Health Coalition (OHC).

Hahn said CUPE and the OHC are demanding that the moratorium on competitive bidding be made permanent and the government start rebuilding a system of direct home care service rather than continue to expand the contracting-out regime brought in by the Mike Harris government.

“We are appealing to everyone in Ontario – patients and families and concerned citizens – to insist that this government redirect its whole approach to home care before it’s too late,” said Sara Williamson OHC official.

“We’re saying they (government) need to start a broad consultation on a different level of home care that will give the people of Ontario what they need,” she said.

Williamson said the ideal situation would be for the government to stop competitive bidding and develop an alternative that would be a community-based, non-profit model of care.

“This would be a more cost-efficient service and more health care dollars would be going directly to providing good home care for patients,” she said.

Jules Tupker is all too familiar with the home care system as his father and mother-in-law both received home care.

He said home care workers are on the short end of wages, working conditions and benefits compared to equivalent employees in hospitals and long-term care facilities.

“So, there is no interest for people to stay in the home care business when they know they can go into long-term care and hospital work and do the same work for better wages and better working conditions and better benefits,” Tupker said. “So

because of that we end up with a reduction in staff and reduction in the quality of the work because they don't want to stay there and they move on. . . . What we're finding is that there is no continuity in home support work,"

This happened to his father who trusted and got used to regular visits from his home care worker until the worker got a better offer elsewhere and left.

During the time the worker cared for Tupker's father, he (worker) became familiar with his father's condition, personal interests and idiosyncrasies, something a new worker would have to learn over time.

"At the end of the day, he (Tupker's father) said he couldn't deal with it anymore and went in a long-term care home," Tupker said.

"That's what we're finding in home care where there's this constant turnover that's causing problems for the people that they service."

Tupker said a study showed that 57 per cent of home care workers surveyed change jobs within 12 months.