

## **Competition may be unhealthy**

**HEALTH: Union leaders warn Ontario's frail will suffer if the government lifts ban on bidding among home caregivers**

By RANDY RICHMOND, THE LONDON FREE PRESS

May 7, 2010

Health care for Ontario's frail will turn into a bidding war with lots of casualties if the province lifts its long-standing ban on competition for home care, union leaders warn.

"We are very worried about the impact this is going to have," Michael Hurley, president of the Ontario Council of Hospital Unions, said Thursday.

"Competition in the home care sector is going to have a harmful effect on care."

Hurley is also the Ontario vice-president of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, which represents 2,000 Ontario home care workers.

"There will be cost savings for the government under competitive bidding," Hurley said. "This is an area where they can exploit the workers to the detriment of the patients."

But Health Minister Deb Matthews said the bidding process won't begin again until the government completes a review of the system.

"We need to ensure the highest quality of care with the best value for the dollar," she said.

Many of the contracts were set to expire March 31, raising an alarm with health care unions.

But Matthews said those contracts have been extended and there's no date set for the moratorium to be lifted.

Still, she said, the moratorium will be lifted at some point.

Fifteen years ago, not-for-profit agencies provided home care, a range of services mainly for people discharged from hospital, Hurley said.

But in the mid-1990s Mike Harris's Conservative government opened up the service to competitive bidding.

That led to for-profit companies getting into the home care business and cutting costs in an effort to win and keep contracts, Hurley said.

"For people who receive the care, gradually many of their supports were withdrawn. People became more frail and ironically ended up being institutionalized again."

Home care workers saw their work hours and benefits cut and salaries stall at an average \$12 an hour, Hurley said, citing studies by the Health Ministry.

Starting in 2004, Premier Dalton McGuinty twice put a moratorium on competitive bidding, but has let the latest one lapse.

That means contracts that expire are going to be open for bidding again, Hurley warned.

That will start the cycle of even more cutthroat competition for contracts, he said.

CUPE is calling on the province to extend the moratorium on the bidding for contracts and launch public hearings on a redesign of home care in Ontario. Too often, home care is seen as a way to replace full-time hospital care with cheaper, part-time care.