

ON HEALTH CARE

October 2005

Understaffed and Under Pressure A reality check by Ontario health care workers

In May and June, 2005, the Ontario Federation of Labour, working in conjunction with affiliated health care unions, sponsored meetings in 17 Ontario cities to examine the consequences of understaffing.

On a daily basis, those charged with providing these most vital human services were telling each other, their unions, management, and the government that patients and clients were either not receiving the care they needed, or were being placed in harm's way.

This message was the same at every regional meeting: In Hamilton, Orillia, Ottawa, St. Catharines, Kingston, Kitchener, Brockville, Thunder Bay, Sudbury, Toronto (3), Timmins, Windsor, London, Owen Sound, and Peterborough, workers were beyond the limit of being able to cope.

"The stress of trying to keep up but of not being able to, has been unbelievable," said one hospital worker. "But you see, when we can't keep up or do our jobs properly, people can die or get really, really ill. I feel sick every day, and every day when I get home I have a good cry for all my patients who didn't get what they deserved, and for me too. I can't take it anymore."

This report is a collection of many of the stories heard around the province. These are the accounts of what health care workers said in meetings to each other and to the Ontario Federation of Labour.

It is also a record of first-ever meetings of health care workers from all sectors and unions. Workers from nursing homes and homes for the aged, retirement homes, hospitals, emergency services, laboratories, home care, public health units, and mental health facilities shared their stories and learned from each other.

In so doing, they came to mutual conclusions that all sectors and workplaces have been hard hit by understaffing; that the problems associated with understaffing, and its consequences are systemic and serious; that if the McGuinty government continues to hide behind the Mike Harris health cuts, and does not immediately and significantly increase staffing numbers in all sectors more Ontarians will die and thousands of others will never be able to achieve full recovery.

As a worker attending the Ottawa meeting noted, "McGuinty keeps making these announcements less waiting time, quicker access to services, stuff like that, that make the government look good for the public. But it's not true. We're the same people that have to deliver these services 24/7 and thousands of us have been cut, with more to come. Sure, you might get triaged in 15 minutes but you'll have to wait forever for help. It is just a horrible thing to do to the public and to us."

Indeed, it is.

We know that despite the serious blows to health care in the past decade, Ontario still has the ability and capacity to be one of the world's leaders. Health care workers want to see our wonderful public system strengthened. So do patients.

What makes this a hopeful exercise, rather than one of despair, is the fact that it can be achieved. There is actually ample funding available – now. According to health care economist, Armine Yalnizyan, “more than \$1 billion has been dedicated to health care and is available for rebuilding”.

Pharmaceutical drugs and medical equipment are two major pressures that are driving budgets through the roof. For hospitals, costs soared from 18% to a whopping 24% in just six years. These cost pressures come from the two parts of health care that are totally dominated by for-profit corporations, and they must be brought under control.

“Choose Change” was the slogan and promise upon which the Provincial Liberals were elected. The public did choose change. They were earnest in their belief that real change would happen. Regrettably, the government has opted for the continuation of the Mike Harris agenda. The terrible Tory legacies of privatization, contracting out of services, casualization of the workforce, staff, service, and tax cuts have been retained as the underpinnings of the new system.

We don’t want Mike Harris. We want the Liberals to make a different choice, and workers across Ontario want to get on with the job of rebuilding. That is one of the reasons why so many exhausted health care workers came out to area meetings. Their accounts were shared with us to enable the McGuinty government to come to grips with what is really taking place.

This publication and the stories contained within it represent a test of whether the government really wants to know what is happening. Long-promised whistleblower protection has never materialized; instead, Health Minister Smitherman points workers to a government 1-800 line! This does nothing to help the Port Perry nurse who spoke out about how layoffs at her nursing home were going to harm the seniors. She was suspended. All health care workers face firing or severe discipline if they go public.

That is why we have not put names with these stories, and it is also why you will read many comments that implore us to “let the government know,” or “tell the government.”

We will do everything possible to publicize this information.

ACTION

There is no health care without people. The Ontario government must immediately and significantly increase staffing numbers in all sectors.

For starters, the provincial government must:

- Declare an immediate moratorium on layoffs in hospitals.
- Establish a required minimum standard of 3.5 hours per day of nursing and personal care for residents in nursing homes and homes for the aged.
- Establish required minimum standards for staffing with appropriate complement of full-time workers in all health care sectors.

If the McGuinty government continues to hide behind the Mike Harris health cuts and does not immediately and significantly increase staffing numbers in all sectors, more Ontarians will be harmed.

We need more health care workers.

It’s as simple as that.

*Copies of the Understaffed & Under Pressure Report are available from the OFL
1.800.668.9138 or from our web site www.ofl.ca*

PLEASE POST

cope343