

FRANKLY SPEAKING: Round One

Seniors and disabled win Round One against Health Minister

By Frank Klees, MPP

Newmarket-Aurora

In the March 13th issue of The Auroran, my column carried the headline, 'A Personal Support Worker's Appeal for Seniors.' In that column, with Donna Bellinger's permission, I shared her email in which she described the consequences of the Liberal government's decision to cut essential personal care services to vulnerable seniors and people with disabilities.

'I am sickened by what our government is doing to our most vulnerable, at risk citizens,' she wrote.

At issue was the fact that under a new Ministry of Health policy, hundreds of residents living in supportive-housing buildings throughout York Region, would no longer have personal support workers available to them on-site, around the clock.

Donna was one of many who appealed to me through emails, letters and phone calls in the wake of the announcement that this service would be cut, effective April 1.

One of those appeals came from 52-year-old Joe Pearson who is a blind, double leg amputee having challenges managing his diabetes. He put it this way, 'I'm very scared. This is going to put my life at risk because they won't be there when I need them.'

Assisted Community Living Program: Cancelled by the Ministry of Health

A number of years ago, the Region of York implemented the Assisted Community Living Program. Under that program, residents living in supportive-housing buildings were provided with around the clock on-site personal care services.

The alternative for many of these residents, given their frailty and, in some cases, multiple disabilities, would be confinement to a long-term care home or hospital bed.

The implications to quality of life and costs to the healthcare system are obvious. If anything, this program should be expanded not only throughout York

Region, but throughout the province.

Region of York was disqualified to provide ACL Program by Minister of Health

Under the province's new Assisted Living for High Risk Seniors Policy, which was announced to great fanfare by the Minister of Health last year, the Region of York was disqualified from providing the personal support services they had been providing for the past 20 years.

Two new home-care agencies would now provide services under a new on-call service model under which workers would no longer be on-site, but would have to be called in the event of an emergency.

The implications to those who had come to depend on that on-site care, understandably caused a great deal of anxiety and concern. I understood that concern, and committed to do what I could to stop what I considered to be a wrong-headed and short-sighted decision by the Minister of Health.

On March 3, I raised the issue on the floor of the Legislature and called on the Minister of Health not to cut this essential service.

On March 15, I participated in a meeting hosted by CUPE 905 that was attended by more than 200 seniors, where I encouraged them to let their voices be heard - to write to the Minister, the Premier and Liberal MPPs and to sign petitions. And I invited them to be in the galleries when I would next raise the issue in the Legislature.

On the morning of Wednesday, March 26, five buses arrived at Queen's Park carrying more than 100 seniors and people with disabilities, personal support workers and family members. They made their way to the public galleries and watched as I challenged the Premier to reverse the decision that had been made by her Minister of Health and to 'restore those services to the people who are here and who depend on those services for their independence, for their safety, and for their health.'

My colleagues in the PC Caucus had deferred the first six lead questions of Question Period to me as an expression of their support for this issue. I thank them for that.

Later that evening, the Toronto Star carried the story that we were all waiting for. Although the Minister of Health was nowhere to be seen in the Legislature when I questioned the Premier, it is obvious that the two had a fruitful discussion following the Premier's feeble attempts to defend her Minister.

The lead-in to the story under the headline 'Ontario backs off home-care changes in York Region', read 'Health Minister Deb Mathews says seniors and disabled people living in five supportive-housing buildings will continue to get 24/7 on-site staffing, after

residents protested?.

I want to thank all who stood with me to get this result for those who depend on these essential services for their health, their safety and their personal dignity.

This is round one. On May 8, my Motion calling for an independent review on changes to the on-site personal care model will be debated and voted on by the legislature.

What will Liberal MPPs do?

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