

May 26, 2005. 01:00 AM

Home-care turnover could ease

Review calls for change in bidding Wants long-term

contracts awarded

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A new report aimed at easing the turmoil in home care recommends agencies with longstanding contracts and offering the best service for the sick and elderly be given "preferred" status in future business.

"If you're excellent, contracts could go up to nine years," former cabinet minister Elinor Caplan, who will release her report Monday, said yesterday after a meeting with the *Star's* editorial board.

Caplan's report, which contains what she called many "substantive" recommendations, follows a six-month review ordered by Health Minister George Smitherman.

He ordered the review amid increasing controversy in Ontario's \$1.3 billion-a-year home-care system that community agencies — many of them not-for-profit operations — were losing long-standing contracts in a new bidding process.

The result was hundreds of layoffs of home-care workers, leaving thousands of frail and ill clients getting used to new personnel feeding, bathing and otherwise helping them live independently.

Not-for-profit agencies blamed bidding rules introduced by the previous Progressive Conservative government, which they said favoured for-profit companies.

Critics also said the process, which made it necessary to bid on contracts every few years, focused too much on cost rather than quality and continuity of care.

While Caplan signalled before her review began that competitive bidding would not be scrapped, she said yesterday that "longer contracts would give greater security to the workers and the clients."

Caplan said her review was centred on improving home care for clients and found "no evidence that the corporate structure (profit or non-profit) has an impact on quality or price or employee satisfaction."

Her report will also recommend setting up a centre for measuring quality of care — a growing trend in the health-care system — and researching the best ways to provide home care, setting benchmarks against which agencies could be measured when seeking to earn "preferred provider" status.

It would take five years of service before an agency could apply for preferred status, entitling it to win contract renewals through negotiations rather than going through a bidding process, said Caplan.

About half of Ontario's home care is provided by non-profit agencies, with the other half by profit-seeking agencies.

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