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Home-care workers quitting

Union says low wages causing staff shortage

Competitive bidding in the home health-care industry could result in dire staffing shortages as workers seek more attractive employment elsewhere, the union representing 2,000 of those workers said yesterday.

OPSEU president Leah Casselman warned the Ontario government that competitive bidding creates "an unstable environment" with agencies undercutting each other for contracts by slashing wages and cutting pensions and benefits.

Agencies currently apply for home-care contracts every three years to five years.

"Problem is, these are skilled workers that are in demand," Casselman told a news conference. "By artificially lowering wages and benefits, you decrease the supply of workers. They are leaving to work in hospitals, in long-term care homes, in clinics and even to take jobs south of the border."

Her view was shared by Kelly O'Sullivan who works with home-care staff in Toronto.

"Workers are leaving the sector because of the uncertainty about whether or not you will have work because agencies are competing to keep costs low and driving wages down. Many of our workers have two, three jobs trying to live on the wages."

Susan VanderBent, executive director of the Ontario Home Health Care Providers' Association, said the issue is more about dealing with increasingly "aggressive discharge policies" at hospitals in Ontario.

"The selection process is not perfect, but it finds the agency that can meet the demand and our clients' linguistic, cultural and care needs," she said.

"When an 83-year-old man wants a Hindi-speaking male PSW (personal support worker) to give him a bath at 7 a.m., we are asking providers, 'Can you consistently provide that?'"

VanderBent said she has not seen data supporting the notion that workers are leaving the field because of pay cuts.

"In fact, overall pay is increasing and standards have improved," she said.

Linda Stamp, a personal support worker, said clients are suffering from the rapid turnover of caregivers.

NDP health critic Shelley Martel slammed the provincial government for not stemming what

she called a "full frontal assault" of privatization in home health care.

A spokeswoman for Health Minister George Smitherman, said he is aware of the situation and agrees there are problems.