

Ontario seems blind to home-care benefits

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Funding crisis: Vulnerable continue to suffer Consider this imaginary scenario. A local hospital makes repeated pleas for money to the provincial government, but is denied. Eventually, it sends a letter saying, if more money is not forthcoming, it will have to close.

Imagine the hue and cry when that information became public. Imagine how quickly the government would act to ensure adequate funding was put in place to at least keep the hospital functioning. Imagine the extent to which the citizenry would rise up in righteous fury, and demand the government adequately fund hospitals or face the political consequences.

To the best of our knowledge, no Ontario hospital is so underfunded it might have to close. But right here in Hamilton, we do have an example of an essential health-service provider that says it will go out of business soon because of chronic underfunding.

VHA Health and Home Support Services is a 70-year-old nonprofit agency that provides services such as bathing, dressing and light housekeeping for about 2,500 elderly, sick and disabled residents in their homes.

Let us be clear: We don't know enough about the specifics of this case to judge who's right or wrong. VHA says that the government has significantly changed the rules since the agency won a contract to provide these services three years ago. It says costs have risen to \$20.60 an hour while the Community Care Access Centre, the organization that oversees home care for the government, is still paying only \$18.75. The CCAC and the government say, "Tough -- that's the agreement you signed, live with it."

The CCAC also says it has other caregivers waiting in the wings if VHA closes its doors. Perhaps, but VHA is hardly the only provider insisting the government is underfunding home care, and jeopardizing the health and independence of vulnerable people in the process.

While VHA's plight is newsworthy, the state of home care and services for seniors in general is the real story.

Not long ago, the government announced a 15 per cent hike in fees charged to residents of Ontario long-term-care facilities.

And, to meet budgetary demands, Hamilton's CCAC has repeatedly reduced and re-allocated services so many seniors who were getting home-care services are now cut off or get drastically reduced help.

They're people like 71-year-old Joy Allaby, who is immobilized by rheumatoid arthritis and needs help with basic personal care chores. Her husband Al does most of the work, but has a total of six hours of respite weekly so he can get out of the house, do other chores and maintain his own health and independence. That six hours of support is about to be cut to two hours because there isn't enough money to keep up her care.

Home care is not a frill. Not only does it allow recipients to live with dignity, it enables them to maintain their independence and health longer, so they're less likely to require more complex and expensive care in long-term-care facilities or hospitals.

Apparently, the government isn't moved by the argument that these are people who worked their whole lives, paid their taxes and deserve at least a reasonable level of support in their most vulnerable years. That's bad enough. But it's even harder to forgive the government for not seeing the practical and sensible benefits of a functional home-care system.

-- Howard Elliott