

COMMENTARY: ‘They are not getting the quality care they deserve’ — long-term care needs an overhaul

In P.E.I., frontline workers are exhausted and residents are being shortchanged

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Karen Jackson: "Long-term care workers in P.E.I. are speaking about their working conditions and they are pleading for help." Contributed photo

Karen Jackson is president of the P.E.I. Union of Public Sector Employees, which represents 5,000 members in both the private and public sector.

By Karen Jackson

The premier of Prince Edward Island, Dennis King, recently said in the provincial legislature that it's safe for health-care workers to speak publicly about their working conditions without fear of repercussion.

The Union of Public Sector Employees (UPSE) commends the premier for making this statement. It's no secret that the health-care system in P.E.I. is under a lot of stress due to chronic staffing and funding shortages. This situation existed before the pandemic and has been exacerbated since its arrival — especially in long-term care.

The government and the opposition in P.E.I. have been talking about the challenges facing frontline workers in long-term care, and most recently UPSE launched a series of videos in which our members speak candidly about their working conditions. Their voices have been altered to preserve their anonymity.

It takes a lot of courage for these frontline workers to share their personal experiences, and we feel their identity should be protected. In the past, we have had to defend workers for talking publicly about the challenges they face at work. I hope the premier's recent statement changes the need for this type of defence moving forward. If there is going to be meaningful change in long-term care, and the health-care system itself, it requires open dialogue and an end to the disconnect between frontline workers and decision-makers. It also requires that stakeholders do not view the current challenges in long-term care as a political football.

Country-wide problem

This is an issue that affects all Canadians and there is compelling evidence, and indeed, consensus on the fact that change is needed. In our province, UPSE has been lobbying for change in this sector over the past six years. We have talked to various governments about the need for better recruitment and retention. The system was under great strain for years and was unable to cope with the added stress caused by the pandemic.

In Canada, more than 19,000 COVID-19 deaths have been long-term care related. We have experienced the highest proportion of deaths in long-term care related to overall fatalities among the 38 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries.

In Prince Edward Island, we had more time to prepare for an eventual outbreak. The government, chief public health officer and the public service did an outstanding job managing public safety, and through co-operation with Islanders, achieved high vaccination rates.

Long-term care homes in P.E.I. were prioritized and put first in line for safety measures during the early weeks of the pandemic. However, despite best efforts, the onset of the Omicron variant in the past few months has led to greater infection rates. Approximately 200 workers and 200 residents in long-term care contracted COVID-19. The majority of deaths due to COVID-19 in P.E.I. have been among residents in long-term care.

If we have learned anything, it's that the system cannot be allowed to go back to "normal." We need national standards for long-term care in Canada. A draft for national standards was released

in January 2022 by the Health Standards Organization. The project was launched in the spring of 2021 and has involved consultation with over 18,000 Canadians and various organizations that have a stake in the outcome. Input on the standards is being gathered until March 25, 2022.

If we have learned anything, it's that the system cannot be allowed to go back to "normal." We need national standards for long-term care in Canada.

The proposed new standards focus on maximizing dignity in the lives of residents and will require long-term care facilities to prove they have adequate staff in place to meet the required care hours. They also will require facilities to track the efficacy of the safety and care provided. Seniors deserve this, and those who spend their lives caring for our most vulnerable population deserve it, too.

Both the federal and provincial governments need to work together to implement the standards, and they must be mandatory and pandemic proof.

Taking action in N.S.

We don't have to look far for inspiration. In Nova Scotia, Seniors and Long-Term Care Minister Barb Adams is supporting the introduction of the national standards. Ottawa recently transferred \$27 million to N.S. through the Safe Long-Term Care fund as that province is hiring more frontline staff and enhancing infection control measures. Nova Scotia also recently invested \$65 million to raise wages for Continuing Care Assistants by approximately 23 per cent, which represents an annual increase of almost \$9,000.

Nova Scotia Government and General Employees Union president Jason MacLean has said, "The wage increase was a critical step on the path towards meaningful change for our continuing care and acute care systems."

Nova Scotia, like P.E.I. and Newfoundland and Labrador, is dealing with serious recruitment and retention issues, which has caused a chronic shortage of frontline health-care workers and has impacted care for seniors and their families.

In P.E.I., we are currently working with the provincial government to make positive and needed change. Our members have come to us for help. They are feeling completely overwhelmed as they continue to do their best to provide care for residents. They are being constantly asked to work overtime as there are not enough staff to fill the shifts.

"There have been times I have left work in tears because we were so short staffed," says one worker. "We should be able to spend quality time with them ... they are not getting the quality care they deserve."

Quality care not only means providing for their physical needs, but also the emotional support that many of our long-term care residents have struggled with since the onset of COVID.

Long-term care workers in P.E.I. are speaking about their working conditions and they are pleading for help. The province supports this necessary dialogue and is in talks with UPSE but has yet to commit the necessary funding to raise the wages and ensure that workers are paid fairly for the important work they do.

P.E.I. also needs to publicly support the implementation of national standards and, along with the federal government, commit money to make this a reality.

I recently met with P.E.I. Health and Wellness Minister Ernie Hudson to discuss a way forward, and I believe there is a will to help frontline workers and seniors in P.E.I.

Islanders and Canadians alike know that fundamental change is necessary and that we must work together to see it through for the benefit of all. Let's stand together to not only improve the working conditions for our members, but also to improve the quality of life for those they care for.