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Nursing home care under fire: Province has broken promise to set minimum levels of care, critics charge

By Harold Carmichael

The government of Dalton McGuinty has reneged on an election promise to improve care in Ontario's nursing homes, Nickel Belt MPP Shelley Martel and union leaders charged Tuesday.

"It's very clear the lack of standards of care have had a significant impact on residents of long-term care facilities," Martel said. "The Liberals did promise to re-institute a standard of care. The reality is the Liberals haven't done anything."

Martel was joined by union officials in calling for minimum standards of care to be re-introduced in nursing homes.

Sharleen Stewart, president of the Service Employees International Union Local 1.0n, said the former Progressive Conservative government eliminated minimum standards in 1995. The standard then was a minimum of 2.25 hours per patient per day.

"Statistics show Ontario offers the lowest standard of nursing home care in the Western

A 2002 study determined nursing home residents in Ontario were receiving 2.04 hours of care per day.

Stewart's union wants to see the figure boosted to a minimum of 3.5 hours per resident per day, a step that would require more provincial money to hire more staff.

Stewart was critical of the care in Ontario's nursing homes, charging that many homes, including the Extencicare chain, use an adult diaper that turns blue when it is 80 per cent filled with urine. When it turns blue, it tells a staff member that a diaper change is needed.

However, if a diaper isn't blue or a bowel movement has occurred, it's not changed, so a resident could remain in their own waste for some time, said Stewart.

"This is a disturbing example of putting profits before patient care," she said, standing outside Extencicare-Falconbridge, one of two Extencicare facilities in greater Sudbury.

"Extencicare pressures its workers to use less diapers to save money, but it puts the residents at risk of sores and infections."

Local 1.0n represents about 12,000 nursing home workers across Ontario, including 200 employees at Extendicare-Falconbridge.

Extendicare-Falconbridge, which is home to 234 residents, is the third-largest long-term care facility in Sudbury. The largest are Extendicare-York (288 residents) and Pioneer Manor (300-plus residents).

David Cheslock, a registered practical nurse with 11 years at Extendicare-Falconbridge, said his facility is understaffed.

"There's a home in Kirkland Lake where the staff member takes care of 11 residents a day," he said. "That's 60-90 minutes to get people up for breakfast.

"It's 14 or so residents to get up for breakfast in Sudbury."

Cheslock said it's time to put more provincial money into nursing homes. "Our residents deserve better, our staff deserve better," he said. "People in Ontario can afford it.

In May, the province gave Ontario nursing homes an additional \$191 million that was to be used for the creation of 2,000 new resident care positions. Stewart said no hiring has occurred.

Karen Sullivan, president of the Ontario Long-Term Care Association (which represents Ontario nursing homes), said the \$191 million has yet to be issued, but it will be used to boost the number of staff at facilities.

"Every time funding comes into the system, it is utilized to enhance staffing levels," she said. "This will increase the level of staff in all of the homes across the province."

Ward 2 Coun. Claude Berthiaume told reporters he plans to introduce a motion at city council Sept. 30 calling on the province to improve the quality of care at long-term care facilities across Ontario.

"They (residents) are not getting enough care each day due to a shortage of staff," he said.

"If a senior rings for help, there may not be anybody around to answer the call."