

Teachers' hiring is a lesson for B.C. seniors care

To do it right, we need to start today, Daniel Fontaine writes.

Vancouver Sun 5 Oct 2017 Daniel Fontaine is CEO of the B.C. Care Providers Association.

Many British Columbians will find it hard to ignore recent headlines about school boards seeking to hire upwards of 3,500 new teachers. Had there been more notice, the stress experienced by school administrators today may have been avoided.

Another sector is about to embark on a major expansion of B.C.'s labour force, and the challenges are equally daunting. In an effort to address the needs of our aging population, the provincial government announced significant new funding for seniors care last spring, part of which will be dedicated to hiring more than 1,500 new staff to work in publicly funded residential care homes over the next four years.

While this is welcome news for B.C.'s elderly citizens and those who care for them, it's clear that without a cohesive strategy, the public may experience déjà vu as care homes struggle to meet staffing requirements.

If hiring 1,500 staff wasn't enough, large numbers of care workers are expected to retire in the coming decade. Without a real plan, we face the prospect of the workforce shrinking while the seniors population grows.

For B.C., labour market projections show huge demand among health occupations over the next 10 years. These jobs will be filled primarily by new entrants to the labour market, followed by migrants from outside the province and outside of Canada. Ambitious targets mandated by B.C.'s Ministry of Health for increased direct-care hours among publicly funded careproviders will be a big driver of job growth.

Within 10 years, positions in health and social assistance alone are expected to generate 66,000 job openings in B.C., in part due to the aging population. By 2025, health-sector employment is projected to increase by an average rate of 2.3 per cent annually, with demand for care aides and health care assistants ranked in the top 10.

To do nothing will only exacerbate the challenge.

During this time of high employment in particular, recruiting care workers has been a struggle. A 2016 survey by SafeCare B.C. found that 70 per cent of care providers in B.C.'s nongovernment residential care sector regularly operate short-staffed, with two-thirds reporting ongoing shortages of care aides. Nearly half (47 per cent) don't have enough licensed practical nurses and registered nurses.

These and other statistics support calls from B.C.'s seniors care providers to develop and operationalize a provincewide continuing care health human-resource strategy, and do it immediately. This is because it takes a minimum six months to train a care aide, and more than a year to train a licensed practical nurse.

A made-in-B.C. health human-resource strategy for the continuing care sector must also address the unique challenges of rural and remote regions, which face stiff competition from urban centres when it comes to recruiting and retaining workers. Then there are lesserknown factors hindering worker retention such as the sector's high workplace injury rate, and the prevalence of worker stress and burnout.

The B.C. Care Providers Association aims to partner with the Ministry of Health, health authorities and with labour unions to increase the chances of success of the push for more workers.

Our organization is calling for the revival of the once-successful B.C. Cares initiative, launched in 2008, to address the issue of displaced workers during the economic recession. This partnership between the provincial government, labour groups and other industry stakeholders ultimately encouraged thousands of candidates to seek a career in seniors care.

In hindsight, it was a mistake to wind down the B.C. Cares initiative in 2012. With today's comparatively stronger economy, there is even more competition for a limited pool of job candidates.

But to do nothing will only exacerbate the challenge. Maintaining the status quo isn't an option if we expect to care for B.C.'s elderly citizens.

We can avoid the pitfalls now faced by our public-school system by planning ahead. B.C. can address the worker shortfall it faces on the front lines in care homes, provided government and the continuing care sector work together to meet the challenge head on.