

Wexford Creek layoffs - CBC Radio On the Island – April 5, 2016 @ 7:11 am

Gregor Craigie: It's become a familiar story in BC care facilities. More than 150 staff have received layoff notices at Wexford Creek care home in Nanaimo. They have been told their jobs will be contracted out as of October 1. It's not the first time this facility has seen such turnover. Staff were laid off and replaced at lower cost two years ago in 2014. The charity that owns the facility says it's being sold because of underfunding by Island Health. Daniel Fontaine is chief executive of the BC Care Providers Association, and he joins me now.

Daniel Fontaine: Good morning.

Craigie: This is just one of many care homes in BC which have sold and then laid off staff. Why does this keep happening?

Fontaine: Well, first of all, I don't think it's commonplace. I think it does happen, and it has happened in the past. I mean, increasingly, I am hearing from our membership that there are issues related to pressures of funding. For example, you know, in the Interior health authority, care providers there a couple of years ago received a 0% funding lift year over year from the health authority, which resulted in a lot of financial pressures to the care providers themselves.

But I think it's important, Gregor, to also recognize that there have been a lot of investments over the last decade in new residential care beds. If you look not only on Vancouver Island but across the province, there's been literally thousands of new care beds brought into the system. But you know, as of late, there has been a real pressure from both the seniors advocate, the federal government, the provincial government.... There has been a real pressure and a push towards more of a home-first model, kind of that home care approach, and what's happened in that is that with that pressure and that movement more towards care in the home, there is a tendency to invest a lot more kind of on that side of the house, and that can result in a lot of pressures for long-term care providers in places like Nanaimo.

Craigie: That is what the Good Samaritan Society, which owns Wexford Creek care home in Nanaimo, has stated pretty clearly in announcing this -- that the problem is underfunding by Island Health, they say. I mean, is that a problem that you hear from other facilities -- that while the province is opening up more beds and focusing on keeping people in their homes, the annual funding to keep these beds going and the people cared for is not keeping up with inflation and increasing every year?

Fontaine: Yes, it's something we monitor very closely at the BCCPA. In fact, we're just about to release a report to our members on that. But if you look and you analyze the actual funding lifts year over year for care providers in the province -- and I'm talking about long-term care homes in that case -- it does not meet even the basic rates of inflation, and as I said, in cases like the Interior health, there were actual cases where the health authority provided a 0% funding lift



year over year. That results in tremendous financial pressures on care providers, who are looking at increases in MSP. They're looking at increases in labour costs and food, and a lot of other inputs are coming in. There's a lot of pressure there.

...You know, when you consider, Gregor, that 42 cents of every dollar being spent by the government is being invested in health care, the vast majority of that is going into acute care. It's going into hospitals. That's where we're seeing so much money poured in. And yet when you talk to the community -- and we have...we've polled the public. We've spoken to seniors. They're saying transfer those dollars into places...into the community, closer to home and places like the care home in Nanaimo or in Kamloops or in Victoria, in places where it's closer to their residence. That's a challenge.

We've said to the government that even a 1% shift out of acute care into the community could result in over the next five years 4,400 new care beds being brought onto the system. Those are challenges that health authorities have to meet, and when you look at, for example, the Fraser health authority, Fraser health authority recently announced a few weeks ago -- and we applauded them for it -- they actually are closing 80 acute care beds, and they're transferring those dollars right into residential care homes and into their home care throughout Fraser health authority. It's resulting in construction cranes and new care homes being built right in local neighbourhoods throughout health authority, and I think that's a good move.

Craigie: The union representing the employees and the NDP in the Legislature have raised concerns about the impact of this mass layoff on care home residents as well as staff. How do you think this might affect the frail seniors who live in the care homes?

Fontaine: We've said, over the last number of years that consistency of care is very important. Whether you're receiving your care at home through home care, home support services, or whether you're receiving it in a residential care setting, the consistency of care is very important. Research will show that keeping those care aides, LPNs, the team around the senior.... It's very important to that senior and also helps to produce better health outcomes.

I know that our members where possible make every effort to keep that continuity of care there, and it's one of the reasons why we, for example, established an organization called SafeCare BC. That organization is dedicated to doing nothing but preventing injuries in the workplace site for care aides, and the reason we've done that is because the more that care aides are off work because they're ill and they're not at the bedside, that results in a lack of continuity of care. So we will be investing millions of dollars in that over the coming years, and we're trying to reduce workplace injuries, because we have identified that the continuity of care is incredibly important.

Craigie: That's continuity of care on an individual staffing level. I think I can well understand why that's important when you've got the individual caregivers and the seniors who rely on them. What about the continuity of care at an institutional or a management level? What would it take to stop the churn in care home ownership and staffing?

Fontaine: Again, Gregor, I wouldn't refer to it as a churn.

Craigie: It sounds like it in Nanaimo, though, doesn't it, Daniel? You know, it's the second time in two years.

Fontaine: Clearly, in this particular case.... I don't know all the specifics of the financial data related to why they're having to make the decisions they are, but I would say, generally speaking, if you look at care homes across the province.... There are about 32,000 beds in the province. The vast majority of those are in a very stable kind of relationship between both the care provider and those receiving care. There are cases like what you've seen in Nanaimo, and they are relatively isolated. I know it's incredibly unfortunate. It's not something that we like to see happen. But as the operator has indicated, our member has indicated, they're under incredible financial pressure, and they're trying to have to deal with that situation the best they can.

Craigie: The Care Providers Association has expressed the hope to "Better utilize the excess capacity in the continuing care sector and reduce the number of people taking up hospital beds" -- you mentioned this earlier -- "when a care facility is more suitable." I wonder how much of a problem is the excess capacity for private care facilities?

Fontaine: We do actually have excess capacity. I think that's going to surprise a lot of your listeners, because they assume that because they hear wait-lists and access to get into residential care, there are no actual additional kind of beds out there in the system. We launched something yesterday called MyCareFinder.ca. MyCareFinder actually identifies right into your local neighbourhood, using Google Maps, where the residential care beds are, whether they're government owned or whether they're in nonprofit or private sector, and it also lists for you.... If you click on it, you can actually see where some of those care homes have empty beds.

And so for the first time, you can actually use your smart phone or your laptop or your tablet and go in and look throughout the whole province to every single care home that's government owned or every care home that is a member of our association and has committed to our code of ethics. They're all listed right on that website, and you can actually see those beds.

We're just at this stage in kind of a pilot phase, so we're just using a limited number of our members, but we were able to identify about 140 vacant beds -- meaning there is actually nobody in those beds at the moment -- throughout the province and about 1,800 beds we were able to identify that were built, constructed. They're outside the government system, but they're definitely all around the province. MyCareFinder.ca allows you now to, for the first time, access that information and see where that's at and whether or not there's anything in your local community.

Craigie: Daniel, it's good to talk to you again. Thanks for joining us on the program this morning.

Fontaine: Thank you so much for inviting me.

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