

HEALTH

BUDGET ESTIMATES DISAPPOINT HOME SUPPORT WORKERS

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The provincial government isn't doing enough to support New Brunswickers working in the home-care industry, says the president of the New Brunswick Home Support Association.

Brenda Dykeman told The Daily Gleaner on Monday she was disappointed with the Department of Social Development's recently released budget estimates, a record-setting \$1.1-billion plan that she said focuses more on special-care homes, nursing homes, and other types of services instead of supporting the province's home-care industry.

"The government announces quite often that home care is first on their plate, that it's important, that they're working on the issues. But when the budget estimates were announced, there was no money for home care. There was money for nursing homes and special care homes," she said.

"In (Premier David Alward's pre-election platform document) Putting New Brunswick First For A Change, they committed to regular increases in wages and benefits for senior care workers every year for the next four years, as well as increases for funding for home care agencies. So that promise hasn't been kept."

She said low wages, non-existent medical benefits and no compensation or credit for the many hours they spend travelling between clients each year has left many of the province's 3,500 organized home-care workers frustrated and disillusioned.

So far, there has been one wage increase for home support workers who work for agencies. In 2011, the province upped their wages to \$11 per hour.

"They're not appropriately funded for their out-of-pocket expenses," she said.

"If they could be compensated for the time they spend going from job to job, and had access to some health benefits, it would make a huge, huge difference to this industry."

Dykeman said investing in services that keep people at home and out of costly publicly funded facilities would save New Brunswick's taxpayers cash in the long run. But she thinks this government has done little to address concerns raised by people working in the industry since taking office in 2010.

"With home care, they're at home. They're paying taxes. They're in their community. Their family is around. Why are they paying for hospital beds or nursing home beds when these people could be at home? It doesn't make any sense," she said.

"If they don't do something, the workforce (will be overwhelmed) by the baby boomers coming on, the silver tsunami that's coming. The workforce just isn't going to be there. Why would I take training for a job that pays just about minimum wage, that's 30 kilometres away, where I have to pay my own

expenses, and where the hours aren't guaranteed either? If their client dies, or has to go into the hospital, they have no work until you can find them another client. So there's no guarantee of income. Tim Hortons starts to look better all the time."

And she said little is being done to ensure that New Brunswickers receive a standardized level of care across the home support industry. People who work for agencies are required to complete training that will meet a standard established in conjunction with the provincial government. But there are close to 1,000 private service providers who can care for patients without any regard for the newly established guidelines.

"The Department of Social Development has indicated it fully supports the right of individuals to request care from a source of their choice," she said. "The NBHSA agrees with this right but is alarmed that the private caregivers will not be held to the standard established in conjunction the Government of New Brunswick. The NBHSA is encouraging the government to mandate all caregivers providing home support (services) to be held to the same standard."

Dykeman said home support workers have been through this before and they'll continue fighting for their colleagues and patients.

"I've been in this industry since 1995 and nothing has changed. We have the same challenges. We keep talking to government and we think, 'Oh, we're having great discussions, we're making great headway, but oh well, there hasn't been any real headway,' " she said.

"We have the same challenges, the same issues. Why don't they want to pay workers who are looking after our most vulnerable (citizens)?"