

CRISIS IN HOME SUPPORT SERVICES – IGNORE IT AT YOUR PERIL

A Woman's View GINETTE PETITPAS-TAYLOR

A home support worker in New Brunswick quit her job a few months ago because she could not afford it anymore.

She was traveling long distances to see various clients on one to three hour shifts, and spent much of her salary, less than \$6.50 per hour, on transportation that was not reimbursed by the agency that employed her. As her resignation letter documented, during one year, she spent about \$3,000 on maintenance, gas, tolls and parking.

The only reason she stayed as long as she did, three years, was because she loved the work and her husband made a good wage. But eventually she could not justify paying for her job.

Her story is one clue to why home support services are in crisis in New Brunswick. New Brunswickers who need some assistance in order to stay in their home, sometimes have difficulty finding home support workers, particularly in rural areas, or they can't get the number of subsidized home support hours needed for their care. This situation can precipitate the decision to enter into a nursing home and can contribute to poor health.

This makes no sense because home support services are cost-effective. The cost per day is a fraction of the cost of a day in hospital, and about two-thirds of the daily cost at a nursing home. For services to be readily available, staff wages and conditions must be improved, because clients cannot pay more.

Home support services include personal care, such as bathing, medication reminders, and delegated health care tasks such as applying ointments and eye drops. Most home support clients cannot rise for the day nor retire for the night without assistance. The complexity and level of responsibility of home support workers' tasks continue to increase, due to shorter hospital stays and an aging population. The Atlantic Provinces have one of the most rapidly aging populations in the world.

Home support services are very different from home health services in this province. Home health services – such as the services of extra-mural nurses and physiotherapists - are based on need only – not financial need- and paid health professionals have permanent positions and benefits, a striking contrast to the working conditions of home support workers.

Problems related to home support services are reaching crisis proportion in New Brunswick, though often only clients and their families are aware of the extent of the difficulties.

Home support workers in the province earn about \$8 per hour with no benefits and often receive only partial or no reimbursement for travel expenses or training costs. Home support workers in urban areas travel about 2,500 kilometres per year, and 5,000 in rural areas. They often have difficult working conditions in the homes they visit, compared to nursing homes and hospitals where specialized equipment and assistance from coworkers can make tasks easier. Home support staff must sometimes deal with abusive clients who suffer from mental difficulties.

Very high turnover of home support staff in N.B. is having an impact on quality of service and on training costs. There is a pending even greater staff shortage - average age of staff is over 50 and only 9% are under 35.

The provincial Department of Family and Community Services pays a subsidy to those who meet the financial and health criteria for home support. A financial assessment form determines how much of the cost, if any, will be borne by the client. The maximum subsidy of \$2,040 per month

has not increased since 1997. Worse, recent increases to the hourly rate have resulted in fewer hours of care for some clients and fewer hours of work for home support workers because there was no corresponding increase to the monthly maximum of \$2,040. While in 1997, \$2,040 bought 215 hours per month; in 2004 it purchases only 175 hours per month.

The current provincial government has substantially increased its funding for home support services over the last few years and it promises a 10% increase between 2005 and 2008. But the situation remains critical. In New Brunswick, home support services are provided to about 6,000 seniors and 2,800 disabled adults aged under 65.

There is heartening news. First, about 50 municipalities and associations in this province last year adopted a motion in favour of improved home support services and improved working conditions for home support workers, an initiative coordinated through the Advisory Council on the Status of Women. Last spring, the provincial government created a labour force adjustment committee to recommend solutions to the problems of recruitment and retention among home support workers. That committee has just completed its work.

Home support is the cheapest and most readily delivered form of care we have. It's part of a modern health care system. That is why the responsibility of home support services should be with the Department of Health. That is the department that has an incentive to have ailing New Brunswickers remain at home with assistance whenever it is reasonable to do so, instead of moving into a nursing or health care facility.

This issue is a women's issue not only because almost all home support workers and the majority of clients are female but also because women are the ones to take up the greater load of informal unpaid caregiving of family members which is the result of the health care system's shift toward community care and to discharging patients faster and sicker.

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