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OPINION

Invest in home care to avoid creating a second crisis in senior care

A destabilized home-care sector is a terrible consequence for people, Sue VanderBent writes.

By Sue VanderBent

In Ontario, we're rightly spending a lot of time focused on the province's long-term-care homes. That includes the Toronto Star's well-researched special section, Crisis of Care, published last month. It is a worthwhile subject and investments are long overdue.

But while we're doing that, and, in a way, because we're doing that to the exclusion of other things, a new crisis is emerging for seniors and other vulnerable individuals who rely on Ontario's home-care system.

Publicly-funded home-care workers in Ontario, including nurses and personal support workers (PSWs), are already paid considerably less than those in long-term care. For instance, a PSW can make between \$4-\$5 per hour more in a long-term-care setting.

This wage difference is causing an exodus of workers away from home care, and the shortages are resulting in less care. It is expected this wage disparity will only grow when the government begins to invest an additional \$1.9 billion to improve the working conditions in long-term care beginning next month.

The government's own expert panel warned against taking a siloed approach in a

report issued last summer, writing that “ ... increasing PSW wages in the long-term-care sector only would likely have a significant negative impact in the home care and community care sector, leading to instability in the health-care sector as a whole.”

And yet nothing has been done.

That is why Home Care Ontario is sounding the alarm. A destabilized home-care sector is a terrible consequence for people, especially seniors, who want to age with dignity in the safety and comfort of their own homes. The Canadian Institute for Health Studies recently estimated that 11 per cent of all recent admissions to LTC facilities could have instead remained at home. That’s one in nine new occupants.

But it’s also a terrible consequence for the provincial government. Because this government was elected on a promise to solve hallway health care. And their focus on one element of the system to the exclusion of another is going to lead to exactly the opposite. It will increase hallway health care once the pandemic is behind us, because more and more people won’t be able to get care at home.

Our health-care system is profoundly interconnected.

You cannot improve one element of senior care without supporting the other.

It is clear that both home care and long-term care need more workers. That’s why we’re calling on government to raise home care wages in the upcoming budget so they are in-line with long-term care.

Home is where seniors want to be. Now is the time to expand, not contract, home care.

Sue VanderBent is the CEO of Home Care Ontario.

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