

Community comes together to discuss new model for long-term care



By Stephen Petrick

It's not over yet ? the battle to improve long-term care in Ontario, that is.

About 20 community members came out to the Lloyd Watson Community Centre in Wilberforce on Wednesday, June 22 to discuss how to fix the troubled, but essential, Ontario industry.

The event, led by a group called Re:Think, featured the showing of a film titled, It's Not Over Yet. It documented a Denmark nursing home's unique approach to care for residents with dementia, through what it called "compassionate treatment." The residents there were treated through hugs, touch, humour and eye contact.

The model stood in stark contrast to some of Ontario's most notorious homes, which according to a 2020 military report, subjected residents to understaffing, neglect and avoidable COVID-19 deaths.

The Wilberforce meeting, which preceded similar meetings at the Minden Lions Club on Thursday and the Haliburton United Church on Friday, was meant to foster discussions on how Ontario can improve its system. The meetings were called Aging Together As A Community.

The fact that Ontario recently overwhelmingly re-elected Premier Doug Ford and the Progressive Conservatives to a majority government doesn't change the fact that advocacy is needed, said David Buwalda, an organizer with Re:Think.

He said Ontarians need to speak up and lobby for a stronger health care system, no matter who's in power.

"You still need everyone to care," said Buwalda, over the sound of meeting participants conversing. "We want to ask, in these conversations, how do we care together? What is our role in this, no matter what the system is?"

Buwalda is working with David Barnes of Barnes Management Group to hold the sessions. Both men spend time in Haliburton County, where there's a spirited grassroots effort to improve long-term care.

The Haliburton-City of Kawartha Lakes Long-Term Care Coalition was formed there in 2020, after the tragedy in Bobcaygeon,

where 28 residents, plus a spouse of a resident, at Pinecrest Nursing Home died of COVID-19 during the pandemic's first wave.

Ahead of the provincial election, a splinter group called the Haliburton Highlands Long Term Care Coalition formed. The group lobbied against the idea of privately-run long-term care homes (there are already several in the province) and argued for higher standards of care in homes, particularly to address understaffing issues and resident neglect.

However, Buwalde said that Re:Think isn't a partisan group and it doesn't come with a set agenda, or list of bullet points that it's demanding provincial politicians address.

The point of the discussions is more about getting people within communities to share ideas on how long-term care can be improved, and, eventually, have those ideas trickle to Queen's Park.

When asked if the meetings are about lobbying for higher standards of care, he added, "we put this together to say everything's on the table. Our question is about what is essential to care, not how it is managed or financed but what is really important. What are the things that make care compassionate or people centred?"

He added that when people think about long-term care, it's important for them to not just think of statistics or numbers of bed, but how people should be cared for.