

Striking nurses demand a fair contract

By Nate Smelle

Nearly 3,000 health care professionals working with Community Care Access Centres (CCAC) across Ontario have been on strike for the past two weeks. After working without a contract since their previous contract expired on Mar. 31, 2014 the Ontario Nurses' Association's (ONA) made the tough decision to strike.

"Taking the vote to go out on strike with the economy the way it is was extremely difficult," said Lisa Turner, branch union president.

"We are very committed health care professionals. We are not just nurses although that is the majority of us. We actually do have nurse practitioners, we have physiotherapists, occupational therapists, and social workers who are also care coordinators. They are truly dedicated to the work we do and the value we bring to the health care system which more and more is shifting from hospital to home. The responsibility that falls to us as the health system changed has grown exponentially over the years."

Bargaining units are now seeking a 1.4 per cent wage increase that is equal to the percentages given to the 57,000 other members of ONA who work in hospitals, the public health and long-term care sectors. The union "which represents 60,000 registered nurses and allied health professionals, as well as more than 14,000 nursing student affiliates" says they have been forced onto the picket lines by their employers lack of fairness in the bargaining process.

"We feel so undervalued and disrespected by our employer," said Turner.

"All the way through this process it is been very, very upsetting. I have heard some of my co-workers say that they are not even sure after all of this if they can go back and work for them. And yet our love for our clients in the work that we do in the value that we bring this kind of hard to pass up."

To date, only one of the 10 CCACs has been able to reach a settlement with ONA. Although similar offers were made to each of the CCACs, so far only the Hamilton Niagara Haldimand Brant (HNHB) CCAC has accepted the offer.

"We are disappointed that ONA rejected our offers for settlement in nine of the CCACs," says Megan Allen-Lamb, CEO, North Simcoe Muskoka CCAC and provincial spokesperson for the CCACs. "These offers were consistent with the offer accepted at the HNHB CCAC and the settlements with our other employees represented across the province by CUPE and OPSEU. It is time for ONA to recognize that we are not the same as hospitals and it is time to come back to the table to bargain."

Turner said they are doing their best to get the message out to the public that they need all the support they can get. She urges community members to call their local MPPs, their Mayor or Councilors and tell them they need help because they can't get the care they need while the CCAC is on strike.

"We want very much to get back to work," Turner said.

"We are just looking for what we consider a normative and reasonable increase that all of the other sectors in our profession have achieved. We don't feel that's too much to ask for. Certainly when we are seeing the CEOs of the CCACs potentially getting a six per cent bonus the work we are doing to balance their budget. I mean that's just not ethically okay or fiscally responsible."

The union said that its members "who are registered nurses, nurse practitioners, registered practical nurses, social workers, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, speech therapists and allied health professionals" remain committed to reaching a deal that recognizes and respects their valuable contributions to the health care system.

Gary Buffett is the manager of communications at the South East division of the CCAC. He said that like the striking health care professionals the employer is eager to resolve this situation in order to start providing care to those in need.

?For us now the focus is on the safety and well-being of our patients,? he said.

?Anybody who is receiving services in-home or in one of our nursing clinics will continue to get that uninterrupted; there's been no interruption to that service at all. What could be impacted are the people coming on to the system. If you work in health care at all that's the reason why you get out of bed in the morning. On both sides we all just want to get back to providing care to the people that depend on us.?

CCAC health professionals in the following CCACs were on strike at press time: North East, North West, Central East, Central, North Simcoe Muskoka, Waterloo Wellington, South East, South West and Erie St. Clair.