



Bill 175
Connecting People to Home and Community Care Act, 2020
A Submission to the Standing Committee on the Legislative Assembly

SEIU HEALTHCARE

With over 60,000 members in Ontario, SEIU Healthcare is one of the largest locals within the Service Employees International Union (between several locals, SEIU represents 75,000 workers in total across Ontario). These members are the frontline workers who deliver services throughout Ontario's health care system, including in hospitals, retirement and nursing homes, long-term care homes, and the home and community care sectors.

The Union represents nurses (both RNs and RPNs), paramedics, lab techs, social workers, and personal support workers (PSWs). SEIU Healthcare works to ensure the voices of all front-line workers are heard, and that the work they deliver is valued and respected.

The recent COVID-19 pandemic must serve as a sobering wake up call to government and other stakeholders in the health care sector. Our system needs fundamental change in how front-line care is funded and delivered. Unfortunately, Bill 175 does nothing to respond to the pressing demands for meaningful change. Instead, the legislation proposes a series of largely irrelevant structural reforms that fiddle with the administrative apparatus of the system while leaving unaddressed the needs of front-line workers and the millions of Ontarians they serve.

It is especially concerning that Bill 175 shifts many of the protections and standards embedded within existing laws from legislation to regulation. We have heard directly from our members on the front-line who are seriously concerned that it effectively weakens oversight, transparency, and protections for families and workers and would give considerable opportunities for homecare agencies to put profits before care.

Since this government was elected, SEIU Healthcare has been calling for meaningful change that improve patient care in the home and community sector, including in long-term care and hospitals. The government has ignored our call for investments in enhanced training, pay and working conditions for front-line staff, including stable full-time work that would allow workers to work for a single employer. The government has ignored our call for increased staffing in front-line care. The impact of this willful neglect has been unnecessary death and infection

for those working on the front-lines and those they serve. Bill 175 does nothing to remediate this situation. As it stands today this completely misses the mark on key challenges facing our health care system at a time when the system is in dire need of fundamental change and thoughtfully planned and implemented reform.

1. Lack of Consultation of Front-line Workers

The Ontario PC Party promised in its 2018 election platform to listen to the voice of front-line providers and make necessary investments to improve the health care system. Instead of being for the people, however, Bill 175 seems to be for the profiteers. This government has chosen to adopt a top-down approach to health system reform that ignores the lived experience of the hundreds of thousands of people who actually deliver front-line services. The proposed legislation was written behind closed doors by system elites and the private operators who stand to profit from these changes. Front-line providers, those who actually deliver health care, were kept out of this conversation and were not consulted in advance about this plan. Maybe that's because, if we were asked, we would have told the government to focus on the things that actually matter – the quality of front-line services available to those who need our home, community and long-term care services.

2. Failure to Address the Health Human Resource Crisis in Home and Community Care.

COVID-19 has shined a light on the massive staffing shortages endemic to the home and community care sectors. This is not a new challenge. For years, SEIU Healthcare has been calling on the government to implement a comprehensive health human resources (HHR) strategy to increase staffing levels in the home and community sector and address a crisis in recruitment and retention.

Staff working in home and community care have poor pay and benefits, insufficient training opportunities and few career advancement opportunities. PSWs, who deliver the vast majority (70-80%) of home care services often have to juggle multiple part-time jobs and live in near poverty. Most of these workers in home care don't have benefits or an employer-supported retirement plan. No wonder 80% of them report being unhappy with their jobs. Low wages, low job satisfaction, hard working conditions, high levels of part-time employment and heavy workloads make it harder for health organizations especially home and community care to recruit and retain PSWs. One of the key issues facing the PSW labour market is that it too closely resembles a casual labour market where the skills, qualifications and potential of the workforce are not fully recognized, rewarded or incentivized. In 2014, the annual turnover in the PSW workforce had reached 60%.

SEIU has been calling on the Ontario government to increase pay and benefits for PSWs in the home and community care sector and commit to more full-time work. Instead of acting to address the situation, the government has actually made things worse. This government has

failed to raise the PSW minimum wage; the planned introduction of a PSW retirement plan for home and community care workers was scrapped and there has been no commitment to even work towards more full-time work.

Government must take immediate steps to improve the working conditions of front-line staff, including increasing access to training and education opportunities and ensuring greater financial security for frontline workers. Bill 175 fails to address this issue entirely.

Conclusion

Front-line workers in the home and community care sectors know that what is needed most to improve our health care system are real and sustained investments in front-lines services and those who deliver the service. If government had listened to what the front-line workers have been saying for many years, we would not have seen the burnout of staff that we're seeing during COVID-19. Providers would not be scrambling to recruit new staff. Infections would not have ripped through our homes and our health workforce would not have felt alone and abandoned in our fight against COVID-19.

The challenges our system faces will only grow as the demand for services continues to increase. SEIU Healthcare is once again calling on this government once again to immediately address our system needs with evidence-informed policy and thoughtful reforms that take into account the voices of the people who continue to care for Ontario's most vulnerable.

Recommendation

1. Bill 175 should be repealed, postponed, and rewritten:

SEIU Healthcare is the largest union in the home and community care sectors, however, like other unions and seemingly most other stakeholders, this legislation was drafted without consideration for those voices on the front-line of care. Further, it was written before COVID-19 and therefore includes none of the lessons/findings from these recent months, and ultimately, it is being rushed through the legislature during a time when most stakeholders are rightly focused on the pandemic itself.

On behalf of our 60,000 members across the healthcare system, we are urging the committee and this government to repeal, postpone, and rewrite Bill 175. Those steps will ensure we create a real plan for transformational change that will give our frontline healthcare heroes the tools they need to deliver quality care for Ontario families.