

POLICY AT WORK

Cuts to refugee health care labelled “cruel and unusual”

RNAO was among several groups applauding a federal court decision in July that ruled Ottawa’s changes to health coverage benefits for refugees are unconstitutional. Justice Anne Mactavish said the policy brought in two years ago by Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s government violates sections of the country’s *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* that prohibit “cruel and unusual” treatment. In her ruling, the judge said the cuts to health benefits have had a “devastating impact” on refugees and put lives “at risk” as a result. The changes forced refugees to pay for life-saving medications such as insulin. Newcomers were also denied dental and vision care. When the changes to the Interim Federal Health Program (IFHP) were first announced in 2012, RNAO responded by writing letters to the prime minister and Ontario’s premier, calling on members to do the same. The association was a visible presence at several rallies organized to draw attention to the loss of health benefits and the federal government’s lack of compassion towards refugees. Ottawa has four months to make changes to the IFHP. However, immigration minister Chris Alexander said the government plans to appeal the ruling. RNAO will continue intense actions to ensure the court ruling is upheld.



Hamilton residents gathered at one of many rallies for refugee health across the province on June 16. Leanne Siracusa spoke on behalf of RNAO and its Hamilton chapter.

Taking aim at privatization

More than 1,200 RNs, NPs and friends of RNAO responded to an action alert in July calling on the Liberal government to ban medical tourism and for-profit plasma collection. Examples of medical tourism, which is the practice of charging patients from abroad for surgeries and other medical attention, have been documented in several Toronto hospitals. RNAO says the practice undermines the province’s publicly funded, not-for-profit system by creating a different class of patient that receives front-of-the-line access in exchange for payment.

Members also responded to the action alert to voice their views on the collection of for-profit plasma. Paying donors for blood or blood products compromises the voluntary nature of the program and threatens the blood supply system, the alert notes. Members want it to stop.

RNAO is opposed to any attempt to make a profit from the provision of health services.

The province has re-introduced Bill 178, the *Voluntary Blood Donations Act*, which was first tabled by former Health Minister Deb Matthews to prevent two clinics from opening in Toronto that would have provided payment to plasma donors. The original legislation died when Premier Wynne dissolved the legislature on May 2. **RN**



RNAO policy analyst Andrea Baumann (left) represents RNs and RNAO at a minimum wage rally outside the Ministry of Labour’s Toronto office.

Joining the “You deserve a raise” campaign

An increase in the minimum wage to \$11 per hour wasn’t enough to convince RNAO that Premier Kathleen Wynne’s newly elected provincial government is doing all it can to help the working poor. RN and RNAO nursing policy analyst Andrea Baumann represented the association at a rally on June 18 alongside other health, anti-poverty and labour groups. A 12-metre long petition containing thousands of signatures was rolled out in front the Ministry of Labour’s Toronto office. The groups want the minimum wage raised to \$14 per hour, arguing \$11 leaves full-time minimum wage earners below the poverty line.

To find out more about RNAO’s political action and policy work, visit www.RNAO.ca/policy