

Health minister quietly shuts down controversial home-care agency

11.09.2018

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Ontario's new health minister has quietly shut down a burgeoning government agency that was intended to provide home-care services when fully up and running, and was a major political problem for the previous Liberal government.

When the Progressive Conservatives were in opposition, the agency — Self-Directed Personal Support Services Ontario — was a frequent target of their ire. The Liberals were adding yet another layer of health-care bureaucracy, the Tories claimed, in order to please their friends in the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) in return for organizational support from the union in the provincial election.

The Liberal government denied this, and said the new agency was intended to assist patients with particularly high needs in setting up self-directed home care, giving them more control over the services they receive and better-tailoring them to their needs.

The controversy was the subject of numerous news stories, question period debates, and media conferences.

But on Aug. 31, the Ministry of Health posted an online bulletin announcing that new Minister **Christine Elliott** had decided to shut the agency down. The move wasn't publicized and, so far, hasn't receive any press coverage.

"Today, the Ministry announced it is winding down the Self-Directed Personal Support Services Ontario agency to reduce the administrative burden of delivering home care," the online bulletin states. "Taxpayer savings will be redirected to patient care. As this agency was in its set-up phase, no services are being provided through the agency at this time, and therefore there will be no impact to home care clients."

Elliott's office didn't reply to *QP Briefing's* request for comment by deadline on Tuesday. However, according to stakeholders in the home care field, the agency's main administrative structure had been established, including a board and executive leadership, but had not begun recruiting personal support workers by the time it was shut down.

The Liberal government's move to set up the new agency was also unpopular with the home-care organizations that currently deliver services under Ontario's decentralized model, in which for-

profit and non-profit organizations are contracted with the province's 14 local health integration networks to provide care.

A group of home-care organizations — consisting of nearly all of the providers in the province — banded together under the moniker "The Home First Alliance for Patients" to bring the provincial government to court over the issue earlier this year, seeking asking the court for a judicial review of the establishment of the agency.

The decision to close it was welcomed by Home Care Ontario — the association representing home-care providers — as well as The Home First Alliance for Patients and the Ontario Personal Support Worker Association.

Sue VanderBent, CEO of Home Care Ontario, said her organization was pleased to see the agency shut down because it wasn't necessary in the first place: Ontario's existing home-care organizations already provide the kind of self-directed care that the agency was intended to provide.

"Self-directed care is an accepted, current practice; it's just not very large," she said. "What we were really fighting against was the creation of this parallel agency."

VanderBent said her organization had concerns about how the agency would work alongside the current providers, as well as about it luring personal support workers away from the current providers when there is a shortage of PSWs in the province. There was also concerns the Liberals wanted to move home care generally toward a more centralized government-run model, squeezing out her member organizations.

Francesca Grosso, the strategist behind the Home First Alliance for Patients coalition that took the government to court, echoed VanderBent's comments, saying the providers are pleased with the decision to shut the agency down, and are also committing to providing more self-directed care in Ontario.

She said the group is withdrawing its application for judicial review.

"Part of the reason we're delighted the government [shut down the agency] when it did, is it was just costing everybody, including taxpayers, a lot of money that didn't need to be spent," Grosso said.

Miranda Ferrier, CEO of the Ontario Personal Support Worker Association, said PSWs are also pleased with the decision, as they'd had major concerns about being required to work with high-needs patients without the support that the current home-care organizations provide.

Ferrier, Grosso and VanderBent said the move to set up the agency in the first place appeared to have been politically motivated on the part of the last government, and they all expressed interest in working with the current government on its plans for home care going forward.

Update: After the initial publication of this story, the minister's office released a statement.

"Our government is focused on developing a model for home care supports that delivers the best possible outcomes for patients in their own homes," the statement says. "That's why the Ministry announced on August 31st that it would be winding down the Self-Directed Personal Support Services Ontario agency – to reduce the administrative burden of delivering home care and re-direct dollars to services. The government is working with the agency on a plan to wind this agency down, while making sure associated costs are kept to a minimum. Closing the agency will result in an overall cost savings for taxpayers."